



# PRABUDDHA BHARATA

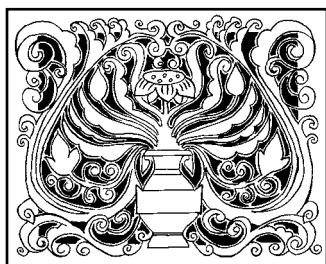
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# TRADITIONAL WISDOM

उत्तिष्ठत जाग्रत प्राप्य वरान्निबोधत । *Arise! Awake! And stop not till the goal is reached!*

## *Invoking Devi Saraswati*

April 2007  
Vol. 112, No. 4

अंबितमे नदीतमे देवितमे सरस्वति ।  
अप्रशस्ता इव स्मसि प्रशस्तिमंब नस्कृधि ॥

Motherliest of mothers, noblest of rivers, godliest of goddesses! O Saraswati!  
We are as if of little repute; Mother, grant us high renown.

(Rig Veda, 2.41.16)

यस्ते स्तनः शशयो यो मयोभूर्येन विश्वा पुष्यसि वार्याणि ।  
यो रत्नधा वसुविद्यः सुदन्नः सरस्वति तमिह धातवे कः ॥

O Saraswati! That exhaustless breast of thine which is the source of all well-being, through which you nurse all that is desirable, the storehouse of treasures, the possessor of wealth, the giver of goodness, that thou provide for our nourishment.

(1.164.49)

चोदयित्री सूनृतानां चेतंती सुमतीनां । यज्ञं दधे सरस्वती ॥

Inspirer of the truthful, rouser of the noble-minded, Saraswati accepts sacrifice.

(1.3.11)

महो अर्णः सरस्वती प्र चेतयति केतुना । धियो विश्वा वि राजति ॥

Saraswati, the mighty ocean (of light), illumines (all) with her light. She brightens all intellects.

(1.3.12)

प्र णो देवी सरस्वती वाजेभिर्वाजिनीवती । धीनामवित्र्यवतु ॥

May the divine Saraswati, rich in power, inspire our minds and protect us.

(6.61.4)

त्वं देवि सरस्वत्यवा वाजेषु वाजिनि । रदा पूषेव नः सनिं ॥

O Devi Saraswati, strong in wealth and power, protect us in conflicts. Like Pushan, grant us opulence.

(6.61.6)

She [Sri Sarada Devi] is Sarada, Saraswati; she has come to impart knowledge.  
... She is full of the rarest wisdom.

(Sri Ramakrishna)

# THIS MONTH

Devi Saraswati is the divine as well as human face of the feminine in Indian culture. She is both the inspiration for and the manifestation of the power that is in Indian womanhood. This number takes a look at some of the images of the Devi beginning with **Worshipping Devi Saraswati**.

**Prabuddha Bharata—100 Years Ago** recalls some of the notable utterances of the 'national week'.

The varied manifestations of Shakti result in a rich diversity of divine forms. Each of the myriad aspects of the cosmic energy that is the Divine Mother is available to the devout as Devi. Devis Durga, Saraswati, Lakshmi, the ten Mahavidyas, and numerous other goddesses inspire the flowering of religious culture. How these are all harmonized in **Devi: Sri Sarada** is the thrust of Devadatta Kali's enchanting narrative. The author, David Nelson, is a member of the Vedanta Society of Southern California, Hollywood.

Dr Raj Lakshmi Varma, Professor, Department of Sanskrit, University of Allahabad, examines how the famous women of Hindu epic and legend blend into the personality of the Holy Mother and how our traditional value systems are harmonized in **Sri Sarada Devi: the Eternal Value**.

Women in Indian society have seen numerous highs and lows over the ages. These changes have been subject to both the vicissitudes of time and alterations in the religious and socio-political landscape. **Women in Buddhism: the Dawn of a New Era** takes a look at the position of women under Buddhism and how it differed from that in contemporary Hindu society. The author, Ms B N Neeli-



ma, is Assistant Professor, Department of Communications and Journalism, Sri Padmavati Mahila Vishvavidyalaya, Tirupati.

**Aghore Kamini Devi—A Pioneer in Women's Emancipation** is a tribute to the unassuming but indefatigable efforts of a forgotten figure in Indian women's history by Dr Sudeshna Basak, Kolkata. The article is based on *Aghore Prakash*, the memoirs of Sri Prakash Chandra Roy.

Swami Tathagatanandaji concludes his narration of **Swami Vivekananda's Devotion to His Mother Bhuvaneshwari Devi** with a recall of the remarkable struggles undergone by Bhuvaneshwari Devi and Swamiji's life-long efforts to attend to her needs. The author, Swami Tathagatanandaji, is Minister-in-Charge, Vedanta Society, New York.

Mrs Alice M Hansbrough provides intimate glimpses of Swamiji's stay at her home as well as images of his struggles in the US in the third instalment of **Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda**. The transcript

of these reminiscences has been made available by the Vedanta Society of Northern California. The text has been edited by Swami Chetananandaji, Minister-in-Charge, Vedanta Society of St Louis, and a group of Vedanta students.

Sri Hariharan concludes his colourful portrayal of **Madurai, the Legendary Temple City**, with a picture of the institutions and festivals of the city. The author is a devotee from Madurai.



# Worshipping Devi Saraswati

**D**EVI SARASWATI is the enduring image of Indian culture. She is the deity reified as the mighty river that nourished the Vedic civilization in both its mundane and transcendental aspects. It was on the banks of the Saraswati that the Vedic rishis contemplated the Vedic hymns, performed the sacrificial rituals that defined the religion that came to be known in modern times as Hinduism, and discovered the spiritual truths underpinning the human being and the cosmos.

To the Vedic rishi, Saraswati was the mother who met all needs: 'O Saraswati! That exhaustless breast of thine which is the source of all well-being, through which you nurse all that is desirable, the storehouse of treasures, the possessor of wealth, the giver of goodness, that thou provide for our nourishment.' She is 'strong in wealth and power', so the rishis inevitably sought out her protection as well as benevolence. But, more importantly, human intellects are her treasure, and she is 'inspirer of the truthful, rouser of the noble-minded'; it was for the elevation of their minds that the rishis prayed to her: 'Inspire our minds and protect us.' And it is to Devi Saraswati, the 'remover of all ignorance and sloth', that students still pray at school: *sā māṃ pātu sarasvatī bhagavatī niḥśeṣa-jādyāpahā*.

### Shakti Puja

The river Saraswati appears to have dried up in the deserts of north-western India in the post-Vedic period. Legend also speaks of Saraswati joining the Ganga and the Yamuna in their confluence at Prayag, thus making it the foremost of pilgrimages (*tīrtharāja*). But this Saraswati is subterranean, not available to our gross eyes. Devi Saraswati, for some reason, seems to have withdrawn the free play of

her powers that made for the vitality of the Vedic rishis. This is also reflected in the dampening of creativity of the Indian mind over long periods in its history.

Sri Ramakrishna pointed out that 'three things are necessary in order to feel the presence of God in an image: first, the devotion of the priest; second, a beautiful image; and third, the devotion of the householder'. His famous disciple Swami Saradananda wrote in an important Bengali tract, *Bharate Shaktipuja*: 'It is well-known that the results of *shakti puja* (worship of Shakti or Power) are instantaneous, especially in the Kali Yuga; all other gods are asleep. ... We find that whatever control humans have over the physical or mental world is the result of Shakti worship. It is the worship of that which appears to ordinary people as physical forces [of nature] that has resulted in the development of biological and physical sciences, in cure of diseases, in remedial measures against epidemics, in supply of food, in different ways of generating wealth as also weapons of war. Similarly, contemplation of mental forces has produced psychology [as a branch of knowledge], poetry, discipline, marriage regulations, civilization, ethics, social formations, politics, and the like; and the calling forth of spiritual powers has made brahmacharya, truth, contentment, the various sadhanas, and ultimate freedom accessible to humans. Of course, all this is the result of the *shakti-upasana* of numerous people over long periods of time. But at all times, whatever power has been contemplated upon by humans to whatever extent, to that extent the results have been immediate.'

Why is there then this pervasive notion of the futility of worship? Swami Saradananda answers: 'The various accessories that are needed for a par-

ticular worship must needs be collected, however difficult this may be; if a certain aggregate of causes produces a certain result, then those have to be brought together. Though this is a very simple fact, people tend to forget it all too often. ... If in order to master Chemistry one takes to ritual baths, austere diet, and to the repetition of one's mantra in seclusion, then how can he or she expect the desired result? Such worship is without appropriate means. To counter epidemics, having neglected external cleanliness and food and water hygiene, if one spends hours in kirtana, that surely is madness. ... If one is busy lecturing about the welfare of one's country, but is not willing to make the least personal sacrifice for this cause, then what result could this worship possibly produce?

### Real Worship

Success in Shakti worship is clearly dependent on our notions of the Devi, of Shakti, of power, and the means of tapping the sources of power. That the principles of Shakti worship are universal and not a sectarian preserve was also pointed out by Swami Vivekananda in his seminal essay *East and West*: 'The Dharma of the Westerner is worship of Shakti—the Creative Power regarded as the Female Principle. ... This worship of Shakti is not lust, but is that Shakti-Puja, that worship of the Kumari (virgin) and the Sadhava (the married woman whose husband is living) which is done in Varanasi, Kalighat, and other holy places. It is the worship of Shakti, not in mere thought, not in imagination, but in actual visible form. Our Shakti-worship is only in the holy places, and at certain times only is it performed; but theirs is in every place and always, for days, weeks, months, and years. Foremost is the woman's state, foremost is her dress, her seat, her food, her wants, her comforts; the first honours in all respects are accorded to her.' He also wrote to his disciple Haripada Mitra: 'Do you know who is the real "Shakti-worshipper"? It is he who knows that God is the omnipresent force in the universe and sees in women the manifestation of that Force.'

If the Devi is manifest in all women, women's realization of their own strength and divinity is an important component in the re-emergence of the Devi. So Swamiji wrote: 'Mother [Sri Sarada Devi] has been born to revive that wonderful Shakti in India; and making her the nucleus, once more will Gargis and Maitreyis be born into the world.'

This re-emergence of women's power was especially manifest during India's independence movement. The reputed freedom fighter Aruna Asaf Ali wrote: 'Revolutions, non-violent or otherwise, test the mettle of men and women. As the drums of liberation grew louder, Indian women plunged into the struggle all over the country and thereby earned the right to be free and equal with men. We shook the citadels of orthodoxy and conservatism. No longer could Indian women be considered as mere goods and chattels, or objects of drawing room decoration.' And women certainly have not looked back since then. Asaf Ali continued, 'Whatever the handicaps we suffer from even after independence, women have much greater opportunities today to reshape society and remove backwardness wherever it exists, as equal partners of men. We cannot expect men alone to smash age-old social shackles. Men and women must fight together to remove all that comes in the way of building a new society.'

Sita Devi, a freedom fighter from Punjab, had been to jail during the freedom movement. Some time after independence she was back in jail, this time for her trade-union activities. The jail superintendent happened to be the same person, and she remarked, 'It appears that jail is written in Sita Devi's fate.' Sita Devi promptly pointed out that freedom had not been realized merely by the British rule coming to an end; 'women and workers have now to fight for their rights'.

Women still have to fight for their rights in a hundred different ways across the globe. It is through this struggle that they manifest the Devi that is Saraswati. To the extent that we participate in this cause, we successfully worship Saraswati.



# Prabuddha Bharata—100 years ago

## Some of the Notable Utterances Of The “National Week”: April 1907

**D**uring the last week of December, Calcutta was the centre of great social, industrial, political and religious activities. This period devoted to the Congress and conferences, has been happily styled “the National Week,” as it brings together from all parts of India, a band of self-denying men representing the intelligence, the culture and the public spirit of the Motherland, fired with the noblest and purest purposes. ...

### THE INDIAN INDUSTRIAL EXHIBITION

I cannot tell you how heartily I sympathise not only in their (Exhibition committee’s) endeavours to develop Industrial resources, but in all they are doing to preserve those characteristic native arts for which India for centuries has been celebrated, and skilled handicrafts which the modern world can never hope to rival; whilst in the larger sense of production for purposes of everyday utility and consumption they have recognised the necessity for the adoption of machinery which modern science has made available to the manufacturer. In these days of competition and of ever-advancing mechanical discovery India cannot lag behind. Sad as it is to see ancient industries give way to novel methods, we should be prepared to welcome all that is good in the inevitable, to adapt our populations to the demands of modern requirements, and to educate them in the knowledge of modern inventions.

—H. E. Lord Minto.

### THE BHARAT-DHARMA-MAHAMANDAL

Religion is the most vital fact in the East. It influences the life of the people in every detail. It is the basis of Hindu society. The Hindu religion and Hindu society have had many ramifications in modern times, but there is an essential unity underlying them all. Whatever may be the case in other countries, no bond is stronger than that of religion

in this country and among the Hindus. Religion is here not only the most powerful of ties, but it is the chief inspiration. Nothing else can take its place. —H. H. the Maharaja of Durbhanga.

### THE INDIAN SOCIAL CONFERENCE

Education knows no distinction of caste or creed or province. In matters of education you cannot say *thus far and no further*. Neither can you say to the winds of heaven “Blow not where ye list,” nor forbid the waves to cross their boundaries, nor yet the human soul to soar beyond the bounds of arbitrary limitations. The word education is the worst misunderstood word in any language. *Instruction* being merely the accumulation of knowledge might, indeed, lend itself to conventional definition, but *education* is an immeasurable, beautiful, indispensable atmosphere in which we live and move and have our being. Does one man dare to deprive another of his birthright to God’s pure air which nourishes his body? How then shall a man dare to deprive a human soul of its immemorial inheritance of liberty and life? Therefore, I charge you, restore to your women their ancient rights, for, as I have said it is we, and not you, who are the real nation-builders, and without our active co-operation at all points of progress all your congresses and conferences are in vain. Educate your women and the nation will take care of itself, for it is true to-day as it was yesterday and will be to the end of human life, that the hand that rocks the cradle is the power that rules the world.

—Mrs. Sarojini Naidu.

### THE LADIES’ CONFERENCE

The manhood and the womanhood of India is our handiwork; let us, mothers, train the future manhood and womanhood of India to the service of our country. —H. H. the Maharani of Baroda.

# Devi: Sri Sarada

## Devadatta Kali

‘**T**HREE Kalis appeared in Dakshineswar’—so begins a Bengali devotional song, ‘*Tin kalir uday*’, composed by Shyamapada Basu Ray. The song describes three aspects of the Divine Mother Kali. The first is Bhavatarini, who lives enshrined in the magnificent temple built by Rani Rasmani. The second is Sri Ramakrishna, who never ceased to call out to the Divine Mother Kali though he himself was Kali. The third is Ma Sarada, who as the embodiment of Kali, never ceased to serve Kali in the form of Sri Ramakrishna.<sup>1</sup>

The song urges its hearers to go to Dakshineswar and see these three Kalis ‘with a full heart’. Behind this beautiful devotional spirit lies a great principle of philosophy and religion concerning three aspects of divinity—three that from another angle appear as two, and two that are ultimately one. The song suggests a triad of the formless Absolute, God with form, and the divine power. These three can be reduced to two: Brahman (*nirguna* and *saguna*) and Shakti, or consciousness and its power. Ultimately, even these two are one. An inquiry into the philosophical foundation of this song will help us to understand who Sri Sarada Devi really is.

Who can guide us through our inquiry better than Sri Ramakrishna himself? Let us begin by looking at his understanding of Kali. For him the image of Bhavatarini in the temple represented the Divine Mother of the Universe, who is not different from the formless Absolute. Repeatedly he told his disciples that Kali and Brahman are one. ‘One cannot think of Brahman without Śakti, or of Śakti without Brahman. ... Kālī is verily Brahman, and Brahman is verily Kālī. It is one and the same reality.’<sup>2</sup> On one occasion he identified these two aspects of the One as *cidātmā* and *citśakti*, conscious-



ness as Self and consciousness as energy (381).

What is the basis for Sri Ramakrishna’s teaching? It obviously reflects what India’s great spiritual traditions have taught all along, but its authority rests ultimately in his own experience of the divine reality. As a young priest performing the worship of Kali in the Dakshineswar temple, Sri Ramakrishna found himself ever more drawn toward the Mother by an irresistible current of love and longing until the separation became unbearable. Determined to end his life, he grabbed the Mother’s sword that was kept in the shrine, and at that moment Kali revealed herself. Everything vanished from sight, and he saw only ‘a limitless, infinite, effulgent Ocean of Consciousness.’ Feeling that it was about to engulf him, he collapsed into ‘a steady flow of undiluted bliss’ in which he ‘felt the presence of the Divine Mother’ (13–14).

Sri Ramakrishna recounted another occasion in the Kali temple when he saw everything as full of consciousness—the Mother’s image, the altar, the worship vessels, the door-sill, the marble floor. Everything was consciousness; everything was saturated in bliss; everything vibrated with the Mother’s power. Clearly perceiving that it was Kali herself who had become everything, he even fed a cat with the food that was to be offered to the Divine Mother (345–6).



For Sri Ramakrishna, Kali was both the infinite ocean of consciousness-bliss and its manifestation as the universal Mother, whose love is boundless and unconditional. His experience reconfirms for the present age a timeless message that the great Shaiva mystic and philosopher Abhinavagupta expressed some nine hundred years earlier. At the beginning of his *Para-trishika-vivarana* he wrote: 'Śakti surely should not be considered as different from Śiva' (*na hi śaktiḥ śivāt bhedamāmarśayet*).<sup>3</sup>

### Devi Ramakrishna

The second Kali of Shyamapada's song is Sri Ramakrishna himself. Swami Vivekananda expressed the same idea in 1898, while travelling in the Himalayas with Sister Nivedita, Sara Bull, and Josephine MacLeod. He told them that there was 'a feminine something somewhere, that wanted to manifest,' and that it had manifested in male form as Sri Ramakrishna, who spoke of himself as 'My Divine Mother.'<sup>4</sup> The following year Sister Nivedita told Vivekananda that she always looked upon Sri Ramakrishna as an incarnation of Kali. She asked if the future would call him that. 'Yes,' Swamiji replied, 'I think there is no doubt that Kali worked up the body of Ramakrishna for Her Own Ends.'<sup>5</sup> Concerning this same question, we also have Sri Ramakrishna's own words. On 15 March 1886, five months before his mahasamadhi, he told Narendra and the other devotees present, 'There are two persons in this [his own] body—one is the Divine Mother—yes, the Mother is one of them—the other is her devotee.'<sup>6</sup>

### Devi Sarada

Sri Sarada Devi is the third Kali of Shyamapada's song. It should not be surprising that the same great power that expressed itself through the form of Sri Ramakrishna also embodied itself as Sri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother. Customarily a divine incarnation comes accompanied by his shakti. Rama had his devoted wife Sita, and Krishna had his beloved Radha. Sri Ramakrishna, who revealed to Narendra that he himself was an incarnation of the same God that had assumed human birth as Rama

and Krishna (303), equated Radha with *citśakti*, the energy of consciousness. Where God is present, so is his shakti. What does that say about Sarada Devi? What did she herself say?

Once while she was staying with Balaram's family at Kothar in Orissa, a disciple found her sitting alone in a corner of the women's quarters, absorbed in thought. Although her eyes were wide open, she did not notice his presence for some fifteen minutes. Then she confided to him: 'This repeated journey to the earth! Is there no escape from it? Wherever is Śiva there is Śakti. They are always together. It is the same Śiva again and again, and the same Śakti too.' Later in the conversation she revealed that she regarded herself only as the handmaiden of Sri Ramakrishna and wished she could do more to relieve the suffering of the world.<sup>7</sup> Thus we understand that the same great power that expressed itself through the form of Sri Ramakrishna also embodied itself as Sri Sarada Devi in order to give fuller expression to her all-embracing love.<sup>8</sup>

Although we speak of her all-embracing love, it will be instructive to remember that throughout the long span of Indian religious history, and even back in prehistoric times, the Divine Mother has been known to have two faces, the gentle (*saumya*) and the fierce (*ugra*). Neolithic images portray her as life-giving, nurturing, and benevolent or, alternatively, as hooded, grim-faced, and presiding over death. It is easy to imagine these figurines as the antecedents of the benevolent Lakshmi and Saraswati or of the sometimes frightening Durga and Kali. Because Indian religion has always portrayed the Mother in gracious and formidable forms, the obvious conclusion is that both aspects represent an underlying spiritual reality. That reality is the all-encompassing nature of the Divine Mother, in whose supreme oneness all the opposing characteristics of duality are reconciled and resolved. That sublime truth is patently manifest in the powerful iconography of Kali.

Naturally reticent, Sarada Devi was reluctant to reveal her true nature, but occasionally a hint of it would slip out from behind her veil of humility.

Many incidents in her life afford a brief glimpse of one of her Devi aspects, most often a *saumya* manifestation, but occasionally an *ugra* form as well. From the time of her early childhood and continuing through every phase of her life, she would give signs to suggest that she was an earthly manifestation of Lakshmi, Saraswati, Durga, and Kali. We shall consider three incidents that illustrate some of these Devi aspects.

### **Devi Awakened**

Sri Sarada Devi assumed human form to serve Sri Ramakrishna, and he, in turn, worshipped her as the Divine Mother, losing his sense of 'I' in her (21). Nowhere is this more dramatically illustrated than in a pivotal event that took place either on 5 June 1872 (according to Sarada Devi's own account found in *Sri Sri Mayer Katha*) or on 25 May 1873 (as recorded by Swami Saradananda in *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Lilaprasanga*).<sup>9</sup> On the night when the Phalaharini Kali Puja was to be celebrated in the main temple at Dakshineswar, Sri Ramakrishna ordered preparations made for a private puja in his room. His nephew Hriday and Dinu, the priest of the Radha-Govinda temple, assisted in procuring the necessary items: flowers, bel leaves, food offerings, and all the rest. To the right of the worshipper's seat was placed a beautifully decorated wooden seat, intended for the image of the goddess. When the preparations were completed, Sri Ramakrishna remained alone in his room. At his request, his young wife Sarada arrived at 9 p. m. After he had carried out the preliminary steps of the worship, he indicated for her to take the seat reserved for the image. Already in a high spiritual mood, she complied. Sprinkling sanctified water on her, Sri Ramakrishna then invoked the deity, saying: 'O Divine Mother Tripura-sundari! O Eternal Virgin, possessor of all power! Please open the gate of perfection. Purify her body and mind, and manifest Yourself through her for the welfare of all' (352).

As the worship proceeded, Sarada and Sri Ramakrishna lost outer consciousness and were united in the transcendental unity of samadhi. Both

realized their identity with the Absolute. Long after midnight, regaining some awareness of the outer world, Sri Ramakrishna offered himself to the Divine Mother, now manifest in the form of Sarada. He surrendered himself, along with his *japamala* and the results of all his sadhana, at her feet and then recited a sloka from the *Chandi*: 'O Consort of Shiva, the most auspicious of all auspicious beings! O Doer of all actions! O Refuge of all! O three-eyed goddess of golden complexion! O Power of Narayana, I salute You again and again' (352).

Ordinarily one performs the worship of Tripurasundari, the Shodashi Puja, with some intent of personal gain or a desired result. What was Sri Ramakrishna's motive? We can certainly rule out personal gain. The Bhairavi Brahmani had already declared at the end of Sri Ramakrishna's Tantric sadhana that he was established in *divyabhava*, a state of consciousness in which he experienced the whole universe as the Divine Mother.<sup>10</sup> We find his own vivid description of that exalted mood in his account of his experience in the Kali temple when he saw everything as consciousness. We can rule out personal gain as his reason for performing the Shodashi Puja, but was there another result that he wished to bring about? For him the puja was the culmination of twelve long years of sadhana, an act of complete self-surrender to the Divine Mother. At the same time, it was the means to awaken Sarada to the great spiritual power that was potential in her. With this worship Ramakrishna acknowledged her as a partner in his earthly mission. No other divine consort, not even Sita or Radha, has played such an active role in spreading the avatar's message.<sup>11</sup> As his shakti, Sarada Devi was Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual equal, destined to become the guiding and protecting force of the monastic order that would some day be established in his name. For these and other reasons, the significance of the Shodashi Puja cannot be overestimated; yet even after this defining moment in her earthly life, Sarada Devi remained to outward eyes the simple, devoted, hard-working wife of the holy man of Dakshineswar.

Since everything Sri Ramakrishna did was guided by the Divine Mother, so was this Shodashi Puja. He did not divulge the details of it to anyone, not even to Hriday and Dinu, who had assisted with the preparations. They had no idea that he would evoke the Mother in the form of Tripurasundari, which was a total break with precedent on the new-moon night of the Phalaharini Kali Puja.<sup>12</sup> The shastras enjoin that Tripurasundari, or Shodashi, be worshipped on the night of the *full* moon. Different times are auspicious for the worship of different aspects of the Divine Mother. Kali, during Maharatri (cosmic dissolution), is in her *nirguna* state; it is then that mind, form, and all other attributes dissolve into 'no-thingness' (not nothingness, but a positive state devoid of all qualities), leaving only infinite, self-luminous consciousness. Tripurasundari is just the opposite. Rather than revealing 'no-thingness', she manifests *purnatva*, the divine fullness of beauty, grace, and all other virtues. In invoking Tripurasundari, Sri Ramakrishna revealed Sarada Devi as the power of divine fullness and universal motherhood (28–9). That explains why when Holy Mother was once asked if she were the mother of all, she replied, 'Yes.' When pressed further with the question, 'Even of these birds and animals?' her reply was, 'Yes, of these also.'<sup>13</sup>

### **Devi Saraswati, Durga, Lakshmi**

The Shodashi Puja belongs to the Tantric tradition known as Srividya, which has a surprising connection to Shankaracharya, the great exponent of Advaita Vedanta, and to the Ramakrishna Order. The connection goes all the way back to Shankara's famous debate with Mandana Mishra, an adherent of the Mimamsa school. In the debate, Shankara upheld the superiority of knowledge over Vedic ritualism; Mandana defended the supremacy of Vedic ritual; and Mandana's wife, Ubhayabharati, by virtue of her superior wisdom, acted as the moderator. When Mandana was defeated, his wife, who was regarded as an incarnation of the goddess Saraswati, revealed her intention to leave her body. Shankara tried to dissuade her, saying that if she

were to withdraw from the world, the knowledge of Brahman would leave with her. Ubhayabharati then instructed Shankara to install a Srichakra, the yantra of Tripurasundari, in his math at Sringeri, saying that her presence would abide there to protect the knowledge of Brahman.<sup>14</sup>

Because Sri Ramakrishna achieved nirvikalpa samadhi under the tutelage of Totapuri, a sannyasin of the Puri tradition of Shankara's monastic orders, the Ramakrishna Order belongs to the Puri lineage at Sringeri. The presiding deity there is the Divine Mother Sharadamba, also called Saraswati. And the Srichakra represents that same aspect of the Divine Mother called variously Srividya, Tripurasundari, Shodashi, Kamakshi, and Rajarajeshwari. In accordance with this long line of tradition, we can determine that in performing the Shodashi Puja, Sri Ramakrishna installed the knowledge of Brahman in the human form of Sarada Devi (34) and made her the presiding deity of the future Ramakrishna Order.<sup>15</sup>

Although the goddess Saraswati figures in the story of Shankara's debate and therefore in the Shodashi Puja, Sri Ramakrishna had already identified his wife with Saraswati long before. When Sarada was five years old and about to be married to the young priest from Dakshineswar, the groom's family could not afford to purchase the traditional bride's bangles. The immediate solution was to borrow the bangles from the Laha family and to return them after the marriage ceremony. Apparently no one took into account that little Sarada would not want to relinquish the beautiful ornaments, which had to be given back to the rightful owners. That night, while the girl slept peacefully, Ramakrishna carefully removed the bangles, which were then returned to the Lahas. Imagine the little girl's distress on waking the next morning and finding them gone. Her mother-in-law consoled her with the promise that some day Gadai (Ramakrishna) would give her more precious ornaments than those.

Thirteen years later, when Sarada went to live with her husband at Dakshineswar, the promise was fulfilled. Considering Sri Ramakrishna's aversion to money and his inability to store up anything for fu-



*Devi  
Bagalamukhi:  
immobilizing  
evil impulses*

ture use, the fact that he made good on his mother's pledge illustrates its great importance. With funds that had been saved for him from his priestly salary, Sri Ramakrishna instructed his nephew Hriday to have a pair of gold bangles made for Sarada. And not just any gold bangles. Ramakrishna remarked to Hriday that Sarada was none other than the goddess Saraswati, and that the bangles should be incised to resemble the many tiny facets of a diamond. The importance of the bangles' appearance harks back to a vision of Sita that Sri Ramakrishna had had sometime around 1859. She was the first aspect of the Divine Mother to appear before him. As she was about to merge into his own body, he noticed her diamond-cut bangles, and in his mind they came to symbolize his relationship with his wife. As Rama had his Sita, so had he his Sarada, and the diamond-cut bangles he had made for her became a symbol of his recognition of her divinity.

After Sri Ramakrishna's mahasamadhi, Holy Mother was about to remove the bangles in conformity with the status of widowhood. At that moment Sri Ramakrishna appeared before her in a tangible vision and asked if she thought he had actually died. He instructed her to continue wearing the bangles, and she did so until her growing unease over public disapproval and ridicule led her to remove them. Again he appeared, this time telling

her that Gauri Ma would set things right. That very afternoon Gauri Ma came to visit and explained that Sri Ramakrishna's physical death had no bearing on his divine being, and that as his consort, Holy Mother was herself Lakshmi. As the goddess of prosperity, she was not only entitled, but duty-bound, to wear the bangles. Her doubt removed, Sarada Devi wore the bangles for the rest of her earthly life as a symbol of her divine nature.<sup>16</sup>

### **Devi Bagala**

When Sri Ramakrishna fully awakened the Divine Mother's presence in his wife through the Shodashi Puja, he consecrated every part of her body with mantras infused with the Mother's manifold powers.<sup>17</sup> Shodashi, or Tripurasundari, is one of the ten Mahavidyas or wisdom aspects of the Divine Mother, which include Kali. Since they are all ultimately one, it can be said that Tripurasundari contains the other nine within herself. Among them is Bagalamukhi, one of Mother's fierce forms. On rare occasions Sarada Devi would reveal a fiercer aspect of her divine motherhood, and in one such incident she showed herself in the form of Bagalamukhi,<sup>18</sup> whose unique power is to immobilize the evil impulses of an enemy.<sup>19</sup> Bagalamukhi's *dhyanamanttra* describes her as of golden complexion, dressed in yellow, and adorned with ornaments and a yellow garland. Serious in demeanour, she holds a club in her right hand, poised to strike, while with her left hand she grasps the tongue of the enemy (193).

Holy Mother revealed herself in this startling form once while staying at Kamarpukur. At that time a devotee of Sri Ramakrishna, named Harish, came to the village. His constant visits to Dakshineswar and the Baranagore monastery had led him to neglect his wife and family. To turn his mind back to his worldly responsibilities his wife had administered drugs and spells, and now he was clearly deranged. One day, when Holy Mother was on her way home after visiting a neighbour, Harish began to chase her. Entering the family courtyard, she found that no one was at home. She began to circle the granary, all the while with Harish in

pursuit. After she had gone around it seven times, she stopped, unable to run any longer. What happened next is best told in her own words: 'Then I stood firm working myself up to my full stature (lit., assuming my own form). And then, placing my knee on his chest and taking hold of his tongue, I slapped him on his cheeks so hard that he began to gasp for breath. My fingers became red.'<sup>20</sup> Not long afterward, Harish left Kamarpukur and went to Vrindavan, where he regained his sanity.<sup>21</sup> This incident illustrates that even the Mother's fiercer powers are in fact benevolent.

While Sri Ramakrishna made no attempt to hide his spiritual moods and would frequently go into samadhi before the eyes of astonished onlookers, Holy Mother made every effort to keep her powers well under control. However, hiding her true identity was more than a matter of mere reticence or modesty. There can be no doubt that the cloak of motherhood that concealed her divinity made her more accessible to her children.<sup>22</sup> Even so, she would reveal a momentary glimpse now and then, as the recollections of many disciples and devotees show.

### Devi Kali, Devi Ma

A particularly charming incident took place soon after Sri Ramakrishna's death in 1886. Holy Mother was travelling on foot from her native village of Jayrambati to Kamarpukur, accompanied by her young nephew Shivaram, known affectionately as Shibu. The boy was carrying her bundle of clothes, and when they came near to Jayrambati, he suddenly stopped. When Holy Mother urged him on, he replied that he would continue only if she told him something.

She asked what he wanted to know, and Shibu said, 'Will you tell me who you are?'

She replied that she was his aunt. Who else could she be? At this response, the nephew told her that in that case she could go on by herself. She reasserted that she was his aunt and a mere human being, and he told her again that she could go on alone. At his unwillingness to budge from the spot, Holy Mother said at last, 'People say I am Kali.'

'Are you really Kali? Is it true?' Shibu asked.

'Yes,' Holy Mother replied, and then the two continued on to Jayrambati, the delighted young Shibu contentedly following the Mother of the Universe.<sup>23</sup>



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# Sri Sarada Devi: the Eternal Value

Dr Raj Lakshmi Varma

**S**RI Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother, represents everything that is beautiful and lasting in Indian culture. In her personality we find a strange combination of the spiritual and the ephemeral. It is rather difficult to appreciate the magnitude of her greatness because she appears to be so ordinary and unpretentious: a village woman of innocent disposition, doing common household chores, looking after relatives and friends, seeking nothing extraordinary in life; a woman of the by-gone era who was content to be a daughter, a wife, and a mother, yet having the power to influence generations of men and women all over the world, which she still continues to do by virtue of her love, compassion, and spiritual excellence.

She was the first and the best disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. The latter had realized her great potential and exalted nature long before she herself did. He invoked the presence of Mother Tripurasundari in her and thought her fit to be the recipient of all the fruits of his sadhana. Soon after, experiencing her own divine nature, Holy Mother blossomed into full spiritual glory, but did not shed her shroud of ordinariness. This is what made her so approachable, so lovable, and so much within reach of common people. People could communicate with her much more easily than they could ever have done with Sri Ramakrishna himself—and this enabled her to influence and guide them on the path of self-realization.

The Holy Mother combines the salient features of many a great woman of the past in her nature—outwardly simple, yet profound in its depth. It is interesting to note the similarities between her and the fabled women icons of India. We can divide these icons into two categories. To the first category belong the women who are known for their

noble conduct; to the second, the women famous for their academic excellence and pursuits. The ideals and features of both these prototypes find expression in Holy Mother's life and thought. This became possible because she had realized the unity underlying paradoxes.

When Sri Ramachandra abdicated the throne and took to the forest, *vanavasa*, he also accepted *munivrata*, the pious life of a hermit following vows of tapas and brahmacharya. Sri Sita never posed a threat to Sri Ramachandra's resolve of leading an austere life. There was no carnality in the unselfish concern with which she loved and served her husband. The same applies to Sri Sarada Devi. When she came to live with him at Dakshineswar, Sri Ramakrishna once asked her whether she had come to drag him into the meshes of samsara. With a sense of righteous indignation Holy Mother replied, 'Why should I drag you to worldly ways? I have come to help you in your chosen path.' Incidentally, both Sri Sita and Sri Sarada had to endure



Sri Sita and  
Hanuman

RAMAKRISHNA ASHRAMA, RAJKOT

separation from their husbands, though under different circumstances. Both of them were women of substance possessing unusual strength of character who rose to all the challenges that life presented them.

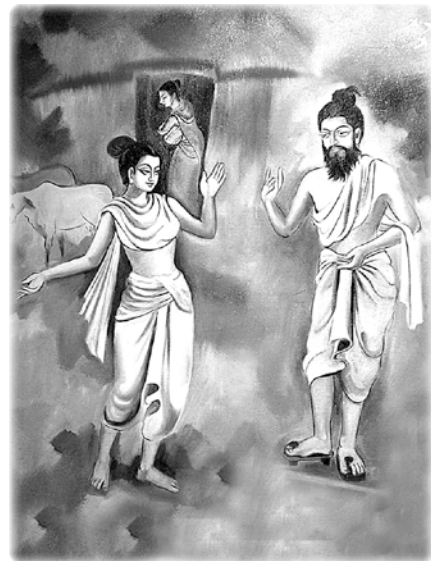
We are reminded of two other women from the annals of Indian history and legend who came close to representing this ideal. They are Savitri, wife of Prince Satyavan, and Draupadi, wife of the Pandavas. Both had to suffer a chequered fate owing to the vicissitudes of life. Savitri preferred the simple life in a hermitage to that of royal affluence, and when Satyavan's short life-span was over, she followed him to the very door of death. With her devotion and intelligence she not only coaxed Dharmaraja, the Lord of Death, to relinquish his hold on Satyavan's life, but also persuaded him to bless them with long life and progeny. Draupadi, in turn, was a constant source of hope and inspiration to the Pandavas. She underwent all the hardships of exile along with them and helped keep the word of honour given by her husband Yudhishtira.

Holy Mother too never had an easy life. Most of the time it was fraught with scarcity and struggle, but she never complained, nor did she ever ask anybody for any help or favour. Her detachment and equanimity were no less than those of Sri Ramakrishna. An indomitable spirit and an abiding affection for their spouses is a common feature of their lives.

When it comes to loving communion of two hearts, we cannot help comparing our Holy Mother to Sri Radha, the eternal consort of Sri Krishna. Like Radha and Krishna, Ramakrishna and Sarada are not two but a unified whole; each is incomplete without the other. Sri Ramakrishna was a doting husband who had great respect and affection for Sri Sarada. He called her his shakti. For Holy Mother, Sri Ramakrishna was the centre of the universe and the very essence of her being. Sri Sarada Devi is also unique in having been worshipped by her own husband. Their association was not of the flesh but of the spirit.

Sri Sarada Devi followed the path of renuncia-

tion and attained rare spiritual heights, like Maitreyi, the wife of the enlightened sage Yajnavalkya. King Janaka, himself a realized soul, held Yajnavalkya in great esteem and presented him with numerous cows and plenty of gold even as he discussed the knowledge of Brahman with him. Once Yajnavalkya decided to renounce the householder's life, leave everything, and go for *tapasya*. He distributed all his possessions between his two wives Maitreyi and Katyayani. Katyayani, apparently, wasn't averse to accepting the worldly goods and the responsibility of running the gurukula. But Maitreyi, a woman of more elevated disposition, asked her husband, 'If indeed this whole earth full of wealth be mine, shall I be immortal through that?' 'No,' replied Yajnavalkya, 'your life will be just like that of people who have plenty of things, but there is no hope of immortality through wealth.' 'What will I do with that which will not make me immortal?' said a resolute Maitreyi, 'Tell me, sir, of that alone which you know (to be the means to immortality).' In answer to her earnest queries, Yajnavalkya preached to Maitreyi the nature and glory of Brahman, the supreme and the sole Reality underpinning the world. Sri Sarada Devi too gave up all her worldly desires and expectations when she came to learn about Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual goals. She was initiated into spiritual practices by Sri Ramakrishna himself,



*Maitreyi and Yajnavalkya: 'Shall I be immortal through wealth?'*


VIVEKANANDA ILLAM, CHENNAI

and soon, guided by her husband and guru, realized her unity with the Supreme Being.

Holy Mother is not a *brahmavadini* in the sense which Gargi Vachaknavi was—Gargi entered into a heated discussion with Yajnavalkya on the nature of Brahman—nor was she a seer of Vedic mantras like Vagambhrini, Ghosha, or Apala. She did not give discourses or compose hymns. But her day-to-day life is a finished example of religion in practice. Her mind was suffused with the effulgence of Truth, and her heart brimmed with love for one and all. Sri Sarada Devi should be called *brahmasvarupini* (of the very nature of Brahman) rather than *brahmavadini* (a teacher of Brahman), because for her Brahman or the Supreme Reality was a matter of experience and not of discussion.

It is her spiritual excellence combined with motherly love and compassion that made her a guru capable of guiding the deserving and the non-deserving alike on the spiritual path. Her motherly qualities like selfless love, tolerance, and forgiveness gave her the magical power by which she could transform and elevate the fallen and the down-trodden. Like Madalasa, she crooned the words ‘*shuddho’si, buddho’si, niranjano’si*; pure you are, en-

lightened you are, stainless you are’ into the ears of her children, and they were freed from the bondage of ignorance. Sri Sarada was a loving mother to all the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. She cooked for them and took care of the smallest of their needs. Spiritual giants like Swami Vivekananda, Swami Brahmananda, and Swami Saradananda were like small children in front of her, vying for her affection and blessings. It reminds us of the famous story of Anasuya, who by virtue of her chastity and unflinching devotion for her sage husband Atri could transform Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva into small children and, putting them in her lap, feed them.

After Sri Ramakrishna’s mahasamadhi, Holy Mother came to occupy the centre stage, took the responsibility of caring for his as well as her own disciples, and became the guiding power behind the Ramakrishna Sangha. She represents all the ethical, moral, and spiritual values of our culture. It is this unique blend of values that makes her so special. Like a diamond she reflects all the colours of life and fuses them into the sparkling white of the spirit. Generations of outstanding Indian women find expression in her personality. She indeed is the complete woman and the eternal value. 



BISWARANJAN CHAKRAVARTY

*Shodashi Puja:  
Sri Ramakrishna  
offering the fruits  
of his sadhana to  
Sri Sarada Devi as  
Shodashi*



# ***Women in Buddhism: the Dawn of a New Era***

**B N Neelima**

**T**HE position of women in Hindu civilization has had a chequered course. With regard to personal freedom and privileges in the spheres of family, religion, and public life they have witnessed various periods of rise and fall. Although comparisons across different time periods are rarely accurate, it may roughly be stated that from a fairly satisfactory position in the Vedic age and the elevated status reflected in the Samhitas, Brahmanas, and Upanishads, women's status suffered a decline during the period of the Sutras, Epics, and early Smritis. This change in women's position in family and society was reflective of changes in societal and cultural norms.

Modernism and postmodernism have given birth to the feminist ideology that propounds the equality of the sexes. But as early as the fifth century BCE, Gotama Buddha had tried to establish a society in which each member could seek salvation by his or her individual effort, regardless of gender. Buddhism had, thus, in its own way helped raise the status of women, in an age when women were often considered mere commodities. Given the fact that Buddha had great compassion for women and supported their joining the Dhamma, an examination of the status of women in ancient Buddhism should prove instructive for modern thinkers.

Buddhism arose in India at a time when the position of women had declined from the earlier heights of the Vedic Age. The dominant priestly Brahmana class perpetuated mindless ceremonies and rituals in the Hindu religion. As these rituals required elaborate Vedic knowledge, women became marginalized in their performance. The Brahmanical religion of the Buddha's day did not

accord spiritual parity to women. The dominance of the primordial male principle (Purusha) in the Vedic-Upanishadic philosophy was also responsible for the marginalization of women in social and spiritual spheres. The Laws of Manu are some of the most anti-feminist of Hindu literature, and severely restrict the religious and spiritual life of women. Manu often puts women on par with Shudras and slaves and forbids them from reading the Vedas. A woman's role was subservient to her husband's, even if he had no virtues. Manu also expounded the myth that all women were prone to evil. Manu's code of law influenced mostly the upper strata of society that thereby underwent a change in their attitude towards women. It was at this time that Buddhism rose as a challenge to the existing Brahmanism that had caused much stagnation in Hindu society. Buddha condemned the caste system along with the mindless rituals and sacrifices that had crept into people's social and religious lives. He emphasized emancipation and liberation by individual effort. The basic tenets of Buddhism—salvation by one's own effort and renunciation of desires—endorse the spiritual equality of both sexes.

While the attitude of Buddha to the role of women was an enlightened one, even judged by modern standards, not everything that is said on this subject in Buddhist writing, even in the Pali canon itself, measures up to the high standard expected of a Buddha. There are many explanations for this, not least of which is that most of these works were written down several centuries after Buddha's Parinibbana, and that during this time the teachings were sustained by monks, some of whom might not have been entirely free from the

prejudices of the age. It is interesting to note that such 'backsliding' occurs most commonly in the later works, for instance, in the prose sections of the Jataka (which, incidentally, are non-canonical). And popular Buddhism took liberties of its own with this mythical aspect of the Buddhist teaching as it did with several others.

We can get an overview of the position accorded to women in Buddhism by putting a few questions. Was the position of women in society before Buddha's advent inferior (or superior) to that during Buddha's time? Were Buddha's teachings instrumental in bringing about changes in women's position in secular and spiritual life? Does gender matter in the pursuit of nirvana through Buddha's path? Do Buddha's teachings treat men and women differentially in spiritual matters? What was the role of women in Buddhism during the master's time? What has been the position of women in Buddhist societies in recent times? These questions are addressed in the following paragraphs.

One of the earliest modern attempts to locate the advancement of women within Buddhism is B C Law's monograph 'Women in Buddhist Literature' published in 1927. Law says that to a large extent women were themselves responsible for their advancement under Buddhism. This opinion finds support in I B Horner's account in her book *Women under Primitive Buddhism*. Horner accepts that Buddhism opened up a certain space for women. She also suggests that women probably also redefined Buddhism to a large extent: 'The approximation of equality of women with men indicates the amount done by Buddhism for women. On the other hand, an unprejudiced reading of the Pali classics throws into high-relief the amount done by women as props and stays of the religion.' Buddha's compassion for all living beings extended equally to women and men. It is important therefore to understand and appreciate the fact that he did not oppose or disapprove of the entry of women into the Dhamma, as is commonly misunderstood.

On the question whether a woman could become a Buddha or a bodhisattva, Buddhist schools

have adopted divergent views. While the Mahayanaists believe it is possible, there is certain ambiguity in the Theravada belief. Buddha himself, however, left this question unresolved as he found it irrelevant to the question of release from samsara, which is the main focus of his teachings. According to Buddhist doctrine, in the samsaric sense there is no male or female, but only a single karmic stream. The *anatta* doctrine posits that there is no persisting identity over the samsaric stream. Dhamma therefore does not accord importance to the sexual identity of its followers.

Some Buddhist stories propound that positive karma results in a woman being reborn as a man, and that negative karma has the opposite effect. The Buddha himself never discussed the reasons for being born male or female, and this belief is therefore without foundation in the Dhamma.

### **Socio-religious Roles of Women under Buddhism**

As continuation of lineage was possible only through a male offspring, and as a girl could not perform her father's funeral rites, procuring a son became the major purpose of marriage in pre-Buddhist society. Buddhism brought about a major change in this state of affairs. Buddha held the view that a female child was as desirable as a male child. When King Pasendi of Kosala, a follower of Vedic Hinduism, was heart-worn that his queen Mallika had borne him a girl child, the Buddha spoke to him thus: 'A girl-child, O Lord of men, may prove to be a better offspring than a boy.'<sup>1</sup>

The Buddha spoke to both men and women householders, giving the Dhamma to both.<sup>2</sup> The Dhamma was free from gender discrimination. So the Buddha's path could be practised both by men and women. The eight components of the Noble Eight-fold Path are usually grouped into three: *shila* or morality, *bhavana* or spiritual growth, and *panna* or wisdom. The practice of morality may in some minor respects involve different kinds of conduct for the two sexes, but in the overall practice of the path, gender has no relevance. The highest

achievement of Buddhism—supreme enlightenment—is available to both men and women. This was stated categorically by Buddha, well before there were any female arhats, when he answered Ananda's question as to whether women could reach enlightenment in the affirmative.

Buddha is given the title *Sattha Devamanussanam*, 'teacher of gods and humans,' not of *purisa* meaning men (which is the Pali counterpart of *itthi*, woman): the teaching of the Buddha is one that could lead all beings (*satta*) to liberation, in whatever realm they live and whatever form they assume. Some texts describe the Buddha as *Purisadamma-sarathi*, or 'charioteer of men to be tamed.' Though this might suggest a male bias to some, feminists have interpreted it to mean that men are more prone to violent misdeeds and have to be 'tamed' to a greater extent than women.

Under Buddhism, woman's field of social and religious activities grew. Slowly, but surely, she was accepted by society as a being of courage and intelligence, sacrifice and devotion. Her right to spiritual advancement and liberation was duly recognized. Buddhism did not consider marriage as a religious sacrament, which was a bold departure from the prevailing social norms. Buddhism suggests that within the broad framework of the Dhamma, a society could allow many different kinds of relationships between men and women. Women in Buddhism were thus allowed considerable liberty in matters of marriage, divorce, ownership of property, and the like. Various cases of remarriage of women are documented in Buddhist texts. These women were, in fact, not widows. They married as per their changing social and emotional needs. These marriages also enjoyed societal sanction. Therefore there were probably no social obstacles to women remarrying at their will. In the story of Kana, included in the *Dhammapada* commentary, it is mentioned that when her husband took another wife, she was adopted by the king and was later married to a nobleman of high standing.<sup>3</sup> Jataka stories also provide ample proof of this. In one story an old squire with a young wife would often worry that

his wife, being very young, would probably marry someone after his death and would give away all his money to him. These tales provide a valuable insight into the societal situation of the times—that there was no opposition to women remarrying.

Buddhism considers death as a natural and inevitable end. In fact, Tibetan Buddhists celebrate death just as they would celebrate any joyous event. As a result a woman suffers no degradation on account of her widowhood. Her social status is not altered in any way. In Buddhist societies she does not have to advertise her widowhood by shaving her head and relinquishing her ornaments. She is not forced to fast on specific days; sleeping on hard floors for self-mortification has no place in Buddhism. Nor does she have to absent herself from ceremonies and auspicious events. Above all, there

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### Therigatha: Songs of the Nuns

#### Punna

Punna, grow full with good qualities  
like the moon on the fifteenth day.  
With discernment at total fullness, burst  
the mass  
of darkness.

#### Mutta

So freed! So thoroughly freed am I!—  
from three crooked things set free:  
from mortar, pestle,  
and crooked old husband.  
Having uprooted the craving  
that leads to becoming,  
I'm set free from aging and death.

#### Dhamma

Wandering for alms—  
weak, leaning on a staff,  
with trembling limbs—  
I fell down right there on the ground.  
Seeing the drawbacks of the body,  
my mind was then  
set free.

—Translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu

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is no religious barrier to her remarriage. Therefore Buddhist women who were widowed could consider remarriage as a viable option.

In pre-Buddhist society, men had started asserting their dominance over women in the conduct of rituals by either forbidding them totally from participating in such rituals or giving them an inferior position. Theravada Buddhism has little place for rituals. Buddhist rituals that involve chanting or simple worship allow for equal participation of men and women. Buddhism also does not submit that God created man first and thus placed women in a secondary position. Buddha did not want the minds of his disciples to be diverted by discussions regarding creation, God, and other metaphysical questions; he wanted them to walk the path out of suffering, as he had done, and not to investigate its aetiology.

The women followers of Buddha understood that their master made no distinction between men and women as far as attaining the highest goal of enlightenment was concerned. An incident described in the Sutta Pitaka is worth mentioning. Mara taunts Theri Soma that no woman can reach 'the high ground of the wise' because she has only 'two-finger knowledge' (that is, knowledge of cooking, where a woman tests rice with two fingers to see if it is cooked). Theri Soma rebuts Mara with these words:

What matters being a woman  
If with mind firmly set  
One grows in the knowledge  
Of the right law, with insight?  
Anyone who has to question  
Am I a woman or am I a man  
And does not oneself really know  
Over such a one will Mara triumph.<sup>4</sup>

Women in Buddhist societies also shared work with their male counterparts. The extant texts however suggest that this was more common among the lower castes and the poor classes than among the upper classes. The *Therigatha* mentions Kali who was a keeper of the burial grounds.<sup>5</sup> The *Dhammapada* mentions a woman who gathered paddy sheaves from the field and parched them.<sup>6</sup> Puna

was a domestic slave woman in the house of Anathapindika. Such slaves, who were considered the property of their masters, find mention in various texts. They were not eligible for ordination. Buddhism laid down that slave women could be emancipated only by the consent of their master. Once freed the women could enter the Sangha.<sup>7</sup>

In the society of Buddha's time, there were also courtesans, trained in dancing, singing, and playing the lute. Four such women—Vimala, Padumavati, Addhakari, and Ambapali—are known to have entered the order. Ambapali was one of the most renowned supporters of Buddhism. Despite the spiritually disturbing effect they might have had on others, courtesans are never openly condemned in the Buddhist literature, being regarded more as piteous and low than blameworthy.

### **The Order of Bhikkhunis**

The Buddha established the order of bhikkhunis only five years after the establishment of the bhikkhu order. It was due to the persistence of Mahapajapati Gotami, his foster mother, that Buddha established the bhikkhuni order. The Buddha had originally refused her request, and it was only after Ananda's intercession that he finally agreed. This establishment of the bhikkhuni order is a revolutionary event in religious history. It was the first time that women were given sanction to freely participate in all aspects of religious life. However, the Buddha did lay down some special rules for bhikkhunis that were not applicable to bhikkhus. Mahapajapati Gotami had to agree to eight special rules (*garu-dhamme*) before she was ordained. These rules were later incorporated into the Bhikkhuni Vinaya. Some of these rules are clearly partial towards the bhikkhus. For instance, bhikkhus would always have precedence over bhikkhunis in matters of salutation. This rule is particularly biased towards bhikkhus, as a senior bhikkhuni would also have to salute a junior bhikkhu, irrespective of her position in the order.

Buddha is recorded to have said, 'If, Ananda, women had not received permission to go out from



*Mahapajapati Gotami is accepted into the Sangha after Ananda's intercession on her behalf*

the household life and enter the homeless state, under the doctrine and discipline proclaimed by the Tathagatha, then would the pure religion, Ananda, have lasted long, the good law would have stood for a thousand years. But since, Ananda, women have now received permission, the pure religion, Ananda, will not last so long, the good law will now stand for only five hundred years.<sup>8</sup> It is, however, imperative that we do not let these words of Buddha distort our understanding of his opinion about establishing the order of bhikkhunis. One must remember that writing was not in vogue during Gotama's time, and his actual words have been edited by later monks and so could have suffered distortion. Nor are there many records of events by the bhikkhunis themselves that could throw valuable light on their daily life in the order.

Whatever may be the case, the establishment of the order definitely gave women a sense of freedom that they could not find in a society ill-disposed towards granting women rights on par with men. Women came to realize that their lives had a certain meaning; the freedom that Buddhism gave them to explore the possibilities of spiritual realization induced a sense of self-worth in them. This confidence they derived from the words of Buddha himself, who told Ananda that women were capable of gaining Arhatship (10.1.1). Buddha had gathered a large following of women in the years preceding his

establishment of the order of bhikkhunis, which ensured that a large number of women entered the order when it was established. Women joined the order in the hope of freedom from worldly troubles and desires, grief, and torture. The concept of obtaining release from existence was also permeating all strata of society at this time. Women readily came forward to renounce their worldly ties and live the monastic life.

Buddha's assertion of the efficacy of the Noble Eight-fold Way in freeing humans of suffering, irrespective of sex, prompted hundreds of women to join the order for the cause of freedom—for themselves and others—both from the drudgery of the world and from rebirth.<sup>9</sup> Not only did women join the order, but they also made significant contributions to Buddhism. The *Therigatha*, a collection of seventy-three psalms composed by bhikkhunis, is evidence of their capabilities, both spiritual and literary. The psalms are witness to the fact that the order had given these women a chance to fully nourish their personality and free their minds (*cittam vimucci me*), and cites instances of their spiritual experiences that are a valuable addition to the spiritual history of humankind.

### ***The Order: Beyond Class, Caste, and Gender Distinction***

Perhaps the greatest contribution of Buddhism

to the society of its time was to remove class and caste distinctions among its followers. The *Therigatha* mentions instances of women from the noble classes, merchant women, and slaves freed by their masters—all living without distinction the harsh and arduous life of a nun. Mention is made of Dhammadinna, who belonged to the merchant class and rose to the position of a great preacher of Dhamma (*dhammakathika*) (verse 12). Patacara, who had mastered the Vinaya and showed the right path to many women disciples, also belonged to this class. Bhadda of the Kapilas was a woman from a Brahmana family (verse 37, also 63–6) who was famous for her recollections of her past life (*pubbenivasam anussarantina*). She was also much famed for her discourses. Sundari was another Brahmana woman who is said to have converted her numerous family members to Buddhism. The unmarried, the married, and the widowed—all found a place in the order. The admission of unmarried women into the order was especially significant as they could now have an existence independent of their fathers or male relatives, who had earlier ruled their lives. They had a chance to express their thoughts and have an opinion of their own, and to exercise their freedom to attain ultimate liberation. It was however made mandatory by Buddha that unmarried girls obtain permission of their parents before joining the order.

Buddhist texts cite numerous women preachers who came to be widely respected. Patacara established a group of five hundred women through her preaching. Showing great compassion towards women who had endured much suffering in life, these nuns, through their preaching, consoled and healed many a heart by teaching them Buddha's path to enlightenment. A number of women thus rose to respectful positions of teachers and guides under Buddhism. A sense of purpose and self-worth was felt by those women who played an important role in Buddhism and made significant contributions to Buddhist literature.

But whatever aspect of Buddha's system made a greater appeal to each one of them, and through

her to her listeners as she emphasized her particular point—whether it was, for example, impermanence, including the transitory nature of the self, or the surrender to a spiritual calm, which is the carrying out of Buddha's will—fundamentally they all taught the same thing. The basic theme of their homilies is development. The notion of evolution—from becoming (*bhava*), to advancement through life-span (*ayu*) after life-span, to something better and happier than what was experienced before—is always present in each one's teachings, though sometimes less stressed as a whole than in some particular aspect.

Apart from these women who were Theris and Arhats, and rose to positions of eminence under Buddhism, women from all walks of life also became *upasikas* and *savakas*, followers of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha.

In early Buddhist literature one sees a free intermingling of the sexes. The celibate monks and nuns had separate quarters, yet the cloister was not cut off from the rest of the world. It is recorded that Buddha had long conversations with his women disciples. The devout benefactress Visakha frequented the monastery decked in all her finery, accompanied by a maidservant, and attended to the needs of the monks. Her clothes and ornaments were the talk of the town, yet neither Buddha nor the monks dissuaded her from wearing them. It was after she developed in insight and asceticism that she voluntarily relinquished her ornaments.

### **Buddhist Societies and Freedom of Women**

In most societies that have embraced Buddhism, it can be seen that women enjoy a better societal position compared to other societies. Thus women in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, and Tibet have enjoyed greater social freedom than in other Eastern societies.

Hugh Boyd, envoy to the Kandyan Court in 1782, wrote:

The Cingalese women exhibit a striking contrast to those of all other Oriental Nations in some of the most prominent and distinctive features of

their character. Instead of that lazy apathy, insipid modesty and sour austerity, which have characterized the sex throughout the Asiatic world, in every period of its history, in this island they possess that active sensibility, winning bashfulness and amicable ease, for which the women of modern Europe are peculiarly famed. The Cingalese women are not merely the slaves and mistresses, but in many respects the companions and friends of their husbands; for though the men be authorized by law to hold their daughters in tyrannical subjection, yet their sociable and placable dispositions, soften the rigor of their domestic policy. And polygamy being unknown and divorce permitted among the Cingalese, the men have none of that constitutional jealousy, which has given birth to the voluptuous and unmanly despotism that is practiced over the weaker sex in the most enlightened nations, and sanctioned by the various religions of Asia. The Cingalese neither keep their women in confinement nor impose on them any humiliating restraints.

Lieutenant General Albert Fytche, Chief Commissioner of British Burma and Agent to the Viceroy and Governor General of India, wrote in 1878:

Unlike the distrustful and suspicious Hindus and Mohammedans, woman holds among them [the Buddhists] a position of perfect freedom and independence. She is, with them, not the mere slave of passion, but has equal rights and is the recognized and duly honored helpmate of man, and in fact bears a more prominent share in the transactions of the more ordinary affairs of life than is the case perhaps with any other people, either eastern or western.

J G D Campbell, Educational Adviser to the Government of Siam, observed (1902):

In Siam at any rate whatever be the causes, the position of women is on the whole a healthy one, and contrasts favorably with that among most other Oriental people. No one can have been many days in Bangkok without being struck by the robust physique and erect bearing of the ordinary woman. ... It can be said of Buddhism that its influence has at least been all on the right side; and when we remember the thousand arguments that have been advanced in the name of both religion and moral-

ity to degrade and debase the weaker sex, this is indeed saying much to its credit.

These instances cited by Europeans who came to live and work in Buddhist countries, inevitably leads us to the conclusion that the position of women in Buddhist societies was much better than in contemporary non-Buddhist ones.

Buddhism gave a new meaning to the lives of women who were subject to discrimination and were not allowed freedom of spiritual practice. For this granting of equal status to men and women in matters concerning individual effort for attaining liberation, Buddhism may be considered one of the greatest of all religions. Buddha was one of the greatest religious democrats, who did away with caste barriers and distinctions based on birth and gender. The social significance of Buddhism is reflected in the elevated status of women in Buddhist societies. His teachings therefore are of great relevance today in a world that stands divided by barriers created by man.



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# Aghore Kamini Devi—A Pioneer in Women's Emancipation

Dr Sudeshna Basak



**A**GHORE Kamini Devi is not a well-known name in women's studies, though she played a very important role in advancing the emancipation of women. She was the mother of Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy, the renowned chief minister of post-independence West Bengal, and wife of Sri Prakash Chandra Roy, a Brahmo Samaj leader and loyal follower of Keshab Chandra Sen, the famous Brahmo reformer. In this article, we shall present a sketch of her life and groundbreaking achievements in girls' and women's education.

Aghore Kamini Devi was born in a respectable, well-to-do Hindu family of Bengal in 1856. As was the custom of that period, she was married at the age of ten, to Prakash Chandra Roy, a college student about eighteen years in age. Prakash Chandra was attracted to the newly formed Brahmo Samaj and Brahmo reform movement; this was a common phenomenon with the Western-educated youth of Bengal of the period. Founded by Raja Rammo-han Roy and carried forward by Maharshi Devendranath Tagore and Keshab Chandra Sen, the Brahmo Samaj became the focal point of the Hindu reform movement in the nineteenth century. It denounced the dark sides of Hinduism—like idolatry, superstition, the caste system, and religious tyranny—and emphasized the need for giving education to women and bringing them out from the age-old purdah system into mainstream Hindu society. Female emancipation was the most important agenda of the Brahmo reform movement that was attracting the educated youth of the day.

## Early Training

Prakash Chandra was one of the youth inspired by Brahmo ideals. He tried to groom his semi-literate wife Aghore Kamini with utmost care and affec-

tion. He taught her to read and write and gave her some elementary education. Prakash Chandra also introduced his young wife to the tenets and ideals of Brahmo religion. But all this was not an easy task. They lived in a joint family, that too in rural Bengal. The training of Aghore Kamini had to be kept a secret. But she was an enthusiastic learner. From that very early age Aghore Kamini had an independent mind and a distinct personality, which Prakash Chandra could readily recognize.

Failing to make a career in Bengal, Prakash Chandra came to neighbouring Bihar—then a part of the Bengal Presidency. He joined government service and was posted to Motihari, a remote district town of North Bihar, as Famine Relief Superintendent, in the year 1874. Aghore Kamini, along with her two infant daughters, came to join her husband in Motihari and settled down in their new environment. This transfer from rural Bengal to a Bihar town changed their life altogether. In Bengal, because of their Brahmo Samaj link, the couple had had to face opposition from the conservative Hindu society at every step. But here, in a small Bihar town, they breathed freely and started living a devoted Brahmo life, following strict moral and religious principles. In 1877 they started a Brahmo Samaj in their own house. This Samaj became the centre of intense religious, moral, and social activity in Motihari. Aghore Kamini's apprenticeship in social welfare began under the careful guidance of her husband. In that year there was a destructive flood in East Bengal. Keshab Sen appealed to his Brahmo followers to come forward with aid for relief work. Prakash read out that appeal to the Motihari Brahmo Samaj. Aghore Kamini was the first woman to come forward and offer her valuable gold bangles for the famine relief fund. From that



day she never again wore ornaments.

In 1877 Prakash Chandra was transferred from Motihari and posted to Bankipur, Patna, as Excise Inspector. Motihari was a small district town; Patna, being the capital of Bihar, opened up wider social connections and greater opportunities for social activity. There was a progressive and educated Brahmo circle in Bankipur, to which Prakash Chandra wasted no time in introducing his young wife. He encouraged her to mix freely with them, and to learn to adjust her life according to her new situation. As Excise Inspector, Prakash Chandra was regularly transferred to different places in Bihar; Aghore Kamini, with her small children, could not always accompany him. She had to stay in their newly built Nayatola house in Bankipur. But Prakash Chandra encouraged his wife to come—by train, alone—to join him at his various posts. Within two or three years, Aghore Kamini became quite accustomed to moving freely without any companion, and she visited many Bihar towns like Bhabua, Dumraon, and Danapur where her husband was posted. These tours gave her a self-confidence and spirit of fearlessness unheard of in those days in a woman in Indian society.

In 1881, Aghore Kamini visited the holy city of Gaya to participate in the annual Brahmo Samaj festival. At this gathering she had a revealing experience: she found that even in this progressive Brahmo circle, women were not accorded equal treatment or equal rights to participate in religious activities, nor were they conscious of this inequity. At the concluding ceremony, the men were assembled in the house of one Shyamacharan Babu and started singing and dancing in devotional trance. But women were not allowed to join this celebration. Aghore Kamini stood up in protest against this discrimination and prayed loudly: 'Oh God, why are women not allowed to develop their minds in various religious activities as men are?' During the *upasana* ceremony, the Acharya announced, 'Let us stand and pray to the Almighty God.' But no woman rose. Aghore Kamini alone joined the men in the devotional prayer. Though this 'unwomanly' behaviour

brought criticism upon her, Prakash Chandra was proud of his wife's courage. This courage was to be visible in all her future activities. In 1884, she allowed her eldest daughter to marry according to her own choice. The boy was from a much lower caste, without a career or social standing. The relatives, friends, and even the Brahmo colleagues of Prakash Chandra could not accept this unequal marriage, and the couple was socially ostracised. But Aghore Kamini had the courage to ignore this.

### ***Brahmika Samaj and Chhatri Nivas***

In 1887, Aghore Kamini established her own Brahmika Samaj (Brahmo women's association) with the aim of improving the lot of poor and helpless Brahmo women of the locality through various small-scale economic projects. These projects gave them some financial relief. Other social welfare activities were also taken up by the Brahmika Samaj among all classes of needy women. Aghore Kamini took the initiative and Prakash Chandra performed the rites for a widow's remarriage in Patna. The orthodox Hindu community reacted sharply.

Her greatest achievement was in the field of women's education. Her interest in this field originated in a very practical concern: she found that two of her Brahmo friends' (Bhai Apurva Krishna's and Bhai Shashtidas's) daughters—one in Danapur, the other in Mokameh—had to go without education for want of girls' schools in those places. Their parents could not afford to send them to Calcutta for education. Her own daughters were first sent to the Bethen School in Calcutta and then were taught at home by private tutors. This lack of literacy among the daughters of her close friends pained her, and she tried to find a solution. In 1891, Aghore Kamini opened a boarding house in her home, calling it Chhatri Nivas (Girl Students' Home), where elementary education was given to girls by herself and her two grown-up daughters. It was a free boarding school, the cost of which was entirely borne by her husband and herself. She went from house to house to persuade poor Brahmo parents to send their daughters to her boarding school.

After running Chhatri Nivas for some time, Aghore Kamini realized that she did not have the necessary knowledge, training, and experience to conduct such an institution. For this, she would have to join a reputed college. She decided to apply to Isabella Thoburn, principal of the Girls' High School in Lucknow. Miss Thoburn (1840–1901), an American Methodist missionary, had added a collegiate department to her school in 1887. (Her school was renamed Isabella Thoburn College in 1903, and later became the women's college of Lucknow University.)

Miss Thoburn, delighted by the enthusiasm of a housewife and mother for higher education, permitted her, along with her two daughters, to join her school as students and stay there as boarders. Aghore Kamini's most important mission in life began. She left for Lucknow, leaving her three young sons, husband, and home, to reside in a distant city. People made fun of her; but she got full support from her husband. Miss Thoburn was extremely friendly and appreciative, and gave Aghore Kamini her whole-hearted cooperation. Aghore Kamini stayed in the hostel for one complete session, spent twelve to fourteen hours a day in study, picked up literary Hindi, improved her knowledge of English, and acquired the experience of boarding life. Miss Thoburn's company and educative influence enriched her enormously. She could now read English books and converse in simple English. She came back to Patna by the end of 1891 with renewed confidence and ability.


### **Bankipur Girls' School**

In 1892, she converted her small Chhatri Nivas into a primary girls' school, calling it Bankipur Girls' School. Patna's distinguished lawyer Babu Guruprasad Sen encouraged her to take up this responsibility. Initially the school started with a few students of her boarding house. Gradually the number increased, rising to twenty-nine, fifteen of them coming from Bihari families. Due to scarcity of teachers, Aghore Kamini herself at first taught all the subjects. She had to learn geography and arithmetic in order to teach them. A horse-drawn

carriage was maintained for three years to transport the girls to her school. The cost of running the school was borne from her husband's income; the tuition fee was negligible. Aghore Kamini sacrificed her personal comfort; she never wore expensive clothing or provided luxuries for her family—things which her husband, now a deputy magistrate, could easily afford.

In 1893, Bhai Hiranand, a Brahmo Sindhi gentleman who had known Sri Ramakrishna, wrote an article in the *Indian Spectator*, an English journal, praising the Bankipur Girls' School and the untiring efforts of Aghore Kamini Devi and her husband. This article drew the attention of the government to the school. Female education had been sorely neglected in the province; some government officials were already looking to address the shortcoming. In March 1896, a Mr Bolton, the then Chief Secretary of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa, came to visit Bankipur Girls' School, inspected all the classes, and showered lavish praise on Aghore Kamini, openly congratulating her in the following words: 'I am very happy to see your school. In India and even in the West such work is done by the unmarried women or the widows. You are the only married woman with husband and children to devote so much time for such [a] noble cause.'

With this official visit, Aghore Kamini's work reached its fulfilment. She wrote in her diary on 31 March 1896: 'Today in the meeting of the school committee, government was requested to take over the school. We got a special government grant of 168 rupees for the expense of the school bus. We started the school with only five students. Prayer and faith in God were our only strength. Now many rich people have come forward with money and men to assist us. Now I can take leave.'

Hard work and extreme worry had tired her out. Her health broke down prematurely. In June 1896, at the age of forty, Aghore Kamini Devi breathed her last in her Nayatola home. After a few years the school was taken over by the Bihar government, and Bankipur Girls' School became the nerve centre for women's education in the state. 

# Swami Vivekananda's Devotion to His Mother Bhuvaneshwari Devi

**Swami Tathagatananda**

*(Continued from the previous issue)*

**B**HUVANESHWARI and Vishwanath were both very large-hearted. Fully approving of her husband's support of marriage for young widows, Bhuvaneshwari joined him in defence of two such marriages that took place in their locality, amidst the strong resistance of their neighbours to this social reform.

Her husband used to buy large properties from court sales and resell them. One of these properties he kept and rented after purchasing it in Bhuvaneshwari's name. When the Muslim tenants were unable to pay the rent, they approached him about it. Vishwanath directed them to his wife, the rightful owner of the property. When she heard their case, Bhuvaneshwari relieved them of their concern. Thereafter, the tenants did not pay any rent and eventually earned squatter's rights to the property.<sup>15</sup>

There is another telling incident of her rare magnanimity and spirit of self-sacrifice. Her son-in-law remarried after her daughter Jogendrabala's suicide in 1891, at age twenty-five, at Simla Hill. Sublimating her own emotions, she accepted the new wife into her home and treated her as her own daughter.<sup>16</sup>

When a heavy deluge of rain fell on Calcutta and its environs for a fortnight in 1900, Bhuvaneshwari sent some foodstuffs through her son Bhupendranath, who had to go a long way through waist-deep water to deliver them to Kankurgachhi Yogodyan (where some of the sacred remains of Sri Ramakrishna are interred).<sup>17</sup>

Bhuvaneshwari Devi was forty-three years old when her husband passed away in 1884. After Vishwanath's death, her resourcefulness protected the

family from disaster. Swami Saradananda describes her ingenuity and initiative:

Fallen on bad days after her husband's death her mettle was put to the test. She however showed wonderful patience, calmness, frugality and adaptability to the sudden change of circumstances. The lady who spent a thousand rupees monthly to manage her household affairs, had now only thirty rupees a month to maintain herself and her sons and daughters. But she was never for a day seen to be dejected. She managed all affairs of her family with that meagre income in such a way that those who saw it took her monthly expenditure to be much higher. One shudders indeed to think of the terrible condition into which Bhuvaneshwari fell on the sudden death of her husband. There was no assured income with which to meet the needs of her family; and yet she had to maintain her old mother, sons and daughters brought up in opulence, and meet the expenses for the education of her children. Her relatives who had been enabled to earn a decent living by her husband's generosity and influence, in place of coming forward to help her in her bad days, found now an opportunity to do something that was to their great liking, and that was to do their best to deprive her even of her legitimate possessions. Her eldest son Narendranath, possessed of many good qualities, failed to find a job in spite of his best efforts in many directions and losing all attraction for the world, was making himself ready to renounce it for ever. One naturally feels respect and reverence for Sri Bhuvaneshwari when one thinks of the manner in which she performed her duties even in that terrible condition.<sup>18</sup>

Bhuvaneshwari Devi was extraordinary in many ways, which evoked profound admiration from her son. It may be recalled that there were several caus-



Swamiji's Sister  
Swarnamayi Devi



Mahendranath Datta



Bhupendranath Datta

es for her suffering—illegal eviction from the family's residence, deprivation of her legitimate share of property, expensive law-suits over many years as well as other acute financial difficulties, and Jogen-drabala's suicide. There was also the significant absence of her eldest son and her second son Mahendranath's absolute silence about his whereabouts in England, where he had gone to study law in 1896. Mahendranath returned to his mother in Calcutta only after Swamiji's demise.

In that critical period of Bhuvaneshwari Devi's financial deprivation and emotional suffering, Bhupendranath joined the Indian revolutionary movement in 1903. In 1907, he was charged with sedition as the ed-

itor of *Yugantar* (the revolutionary movement's literary organ in Bengal). He was sentenced to rigorous imprisonment for one year, after which he was released. With the suggestion and financial aid of Sister Christine, he left Calcutta the same day. Three or four days later, he was travelling incognito to the United States, leaving the police baffled in their fruitless search for him at Belur Math. The women of Calcutta congratulated Bhuvaneshwari Devi for being the mother of such a brave son. Bhuvaneshwari Devi spoke these sober words: 'Bhupen's work has just begun. I have dedicated him

for the cause of the country.'<sup>19</sup> This certainly speaks highly of the magnanimity of her heart and her courageous attitude.

Sadly, posterity knows little of the magnitude of Bhuvaneshwari Devi's influence in the life of her great son Swami Vivekananda, except for a few words pertaining to her in the Vivekananda literature. One photo of his mother alone exists. It speaks of her devotion in following the Indian traditional spiritual life by telling beads and concentrating on the *ishta devata*, the Chosen Ideal. No photo of his father is available.

### **Some Instances of Swamiji's Devotion to His Mother**

A few glimpses into Swamiji's love, devotion, and praise for his mother are now being given. Although Swamiji became a monk, he never forgot the dire poverty his mother was facing. He expressed his anguish before Pramadas Mitra, who sent twenty rupees for Swamiji's mother. In Swamiji's letter from Simla, Calcutta, on 14 July 1889, it is revealed that his mother, out of family pride, did not accept that money.<sup>20</sup> In Swamiji's 'clashing and jarring life', he never forgot the pitiable condition of his mother and two younger brothers, Mahendranath and Bhupendranath.

The Raja of Khetri asked about his family's circumstances during Swamiji's first visit to Khetri. Anxious about his family's economic crisis, Swamiji might have disclosed his troubled mind to him. It is known that subsequent to that visit, the Raja took a keen interest in Swamiji's family and regularly sent one hundred rupees every month to Bhuvaneshwari Devi. This happy news removed a 'terrible anxiety' from Swamiji's mind and 'made it possible for him to face the world and do some work'.<sup>21</sup> This monthly stipend was regularly sent to Swamiji's mother until the Maharaja's death in 1901.<sup>22</sup> Whether she continued to receive it after his death remains a matter of controversy.

When Swamiji was about to go to the West, a dream about his mother completely upset his mind. Later, he described this event thus:

Once while I was putting up at Manmathababu's place, I dreamt one night that my mother had died. My mind became much distracted. Not to speak of corresponding with anybody at home, I used to send no letters in those days even to our Math. The dream being disclosed to Manmatha, he sent a wire to Calcutta to ascertain the facts of the matter. For the dream had made my mind uneasy, on the one hand; and on the other, our Madras friends, with all arrangements ready, were insisting on my departing for America immediately: yet I felt rather unwilling to leave before getting any news of my mother. So Manmatha, who discerned this state of my mind, suggested our repairing to a man [named Govinda Chetti] living some distance from the town, who, having acquired mystic powers over spirits, could tell fortunes and read the past and future of a man's life. So at Manmatha's request, and to get rid of my mental suspense, I agreed to go to this man. Covering the distance partly by railway and partly on foot, we four of us—Manmatha, Alasinga, myself and another—managed to reach the place. There, what met our eyes was a man with a ghoulis, haggard, soot-black appearance, sitting close to a cremation ground. His attendants used some jargon of a South Indian dialect to explain to us that this was a man with perfect power over ghosts. At first the man took absolutely no notice of us; and then, when we were about to retire from the place, he requested us to wait. Our Alasinga was acting as interpreter, and he explained the request to us. Next the man commenced drawing some figures with a pencil, and presently I found him becoming perfectly still in mental concentration. Then he began to give out my name, my genealogy, the history of my long line of forefathers, and said that Sri Ramakrishna was keeping close to me all through my wanderings, intimating to me also good news about my mother. Furthermore, he foretold that I should have to go very soon to far-off lands to preach religion.<sup>23</sup>

We have several intimate glimpses of Swamiji's feelings for his mother. To Bhuvaneshwari Devi, Swamiji was the 'veritable apple of the eye'. To Swamiji, his mother was the one being in the world, if there was any, whom he loved. On 29 January 1894, he wrote to his friend Haridas Viharidas De-

sai, the Dewan of Junagadh State:

Your last letter reached me a few days ago. You had been to see my poor mother and brothers. I am glad you did. But you have touched the only soft place in my heart. You ought to know, Diwanji, that

I am no hard-hearted brute. If there is any being I love in the whole world, it is my mother. Yet I believed and still believe that without my giving up the world, the great mission which Ramakrishna Paramahansa, my great Master came to preach would not see the light, and where would those young men be who have stood as bulwarks against the surging waves of materialism and luxury of the day? These have done a great amount of good to India, especially to Bengal, and this is only the beginning. With the Lord's help they will do things for which the whole world will bless them for ages. So on the one hand, my vision of the future of Indian religion and that of the whole world, my love for the millions of beings sinking down and down for ages with nobody to help them, nay, nobody with even a thought for them; on the other hand, making those who are nearest and dearest to me miserable; I choose the former. 'Lord will do the rest.'<sup>24</sup>

It is interesting to note that although more than 775 letters from Swamiji have been published to date, strangely, we do not come across a single letter that Swamiji wrote to or received from his mother. Still, those who study his life know of Swamiji's tender devotion to his mother while facing his own difficulties with great moral strength and forbearance, of his constant anxiety to make her financially self-sufficient, and of his genuine respect for her great character.

Envious of Swamiji's personal success at the Chicago Parliament of Religions in 1893, the Brahmo leader Pratapchandra Mazoomdar had kept up a long campaign of vituperative slander against Swamiji's character, rousing many Bengalis to his cause



Maharaja Ajit Singh of Khetri

of defaming Swamiji. However, ignoring the slander against him in America and India, and demonstrating indifference towards the accolades Americans were simultaneously heaping upon him, Swamiji wrote to Miss Isabelle McKindley from New York on 26 April 1894:

Now I do not care what they even of my own people say about me [referring to Mazoomdar and those who agreed with him]—except for one thing. I have an old mother. She has suffered much all her life and in the midst of all she could bear to give me up for the service of God and man; but to have given up the most beloved of her children—her hope—to to live a beastly immoral life in a far distant country, as Mazoomdar was telling in Calcutta, would have simply killed her. But the Lord is great, none can injure His children (7.462).

Swamiji had delivered a series of lectures in Cambridge. At the special request of Mrs Ole Bull, he delivered his lecture 'The Ideals of Indian Women' at her house on 17 December 1894. It made a particularly deep impact on the women, who were highly impressed by his talk. Unknown to Swamiji, some American women sent a letter to his mother in India, along with a beautiful picture of the child Jesus in the lap of the Virgin Mary. Referring to the lecture, Mrs Bull wrote:

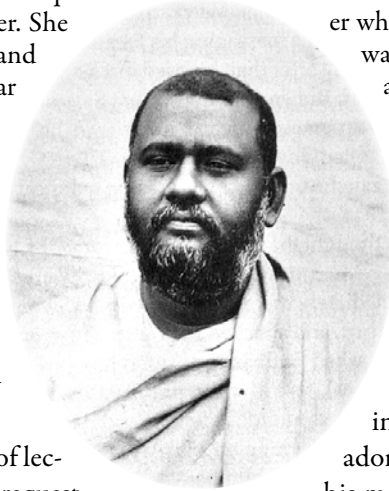
Having given from the Vedas, from Sanskrit literature and the dramas these Ideals, and having cited the laws of today favourable to the women of India, he paid his filial homage to his own mother as having enabled him to do the best he had done, by her own life of unselfish love and purity, that caused him by his very inheritance to choose the life of a monk.

We read further in the *Life*:

It was conspicuous in the Swami that wherever he went he paid the highest tribute to his mother, whenever occasion arose. One of his friends, re-

calling the few happy weeks that he had spent as a fellow guest in the house of a common friend, writes:

'He spoke often of his mother. I remember his saying that she had wonderful self-control, and that he had never known any woman who could fast so long. She had once gone without food, he said, for as many as fourteen days together. And it was not uncommon for his followers to hear such words upon his lips as: "It was my mother who inspired me to this. Her character was a constant inspiration to my life and work."<sup>25</sup>



Swami Brahmananda

Returning from his first trip to the West in 1897, Swamiji went to see his mother at the earliest opportunity, in spite of a very pressing engagement, and continued to visit her frequently. There is a moving portrait of that first visit: 'After a glorious career in the West, after calling forth the adoration of three continents he met his mother. The patriot, the orator and the saint was no more. He was once more

the baby of his mother. With his head on her lap, with all the pranks and helplessness of a child he cried, "Mother, Mother, feed me with thine hands and make me grow."<sup>26</sup>

On another day when Swamiji happened to visit his mother, she had just finished her midday meal. Swamiji was very disappointed as nothing was left over for him to take as prasada. One *sajina* stick was all that was left on his mother's plate. Swamiji immediately grabbed it and put it in his mouth.<sup>27</sup>

We have another glimpse of Swamiji's concern about his mother and his eagerness to give her a little happiness. Once, Swamiji and Swami Brahmananda were staying at Balaram Bose's house. Swamiji, being a diabetic, could hardly sleep at night; he had to take a nap in the daytime. One day, his mother's maidservant was passing through that vicinity and casually asked about 'Naren'. Swami Brahmananda peeped into Swamiji's room and, seeing him asleep, reported that to her. She left. When Swamiji awak-

ened from his nap, Swami Brahmananda told him about the maidservant's visit. Swamiji scolded him severely for not telling him about it. Believing that the maidservant had come on some urgent matter from his mother, Swamiji immediately hired a carriage and went to his mother's place, where he learned that his mother had not sent her—the maidservant had gone of her own accord. Regretting his harsh treatment of Swami Brahmananda, Swamiji sent a carriage to bring him to his mother's place. As soon as Swami Brahmananda arrived, Swamiji, as was his wont, begged to be forgiven.<sup>28</sup>

Swamiji did his best to express his devotion to his mother through action, and was able to make her happy in many ways significant to her spiritual heart. In October 1901, Swamiji performed the first Durga Puja in the name of Sri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother, at Belur Math, which Holy Mother attended. At the invitation of Swamiji, his mother also attended. Swamiji personally looked after all arrangements for the Jagaddhatri Puja at his mother's house; the monks were also invited and participated in the puja.<sup>29</sup>

In obedience to his mother's commandment, a few days after the Kali Puja that same year, he paid a visit to the Kali temple at Kalighat. This was to fulfil a vow of hers. Many years before, when Swamiji was suffering from a serious childhood illness, his mother had prayed to Mother Kali to save him. When he recovered, she vowed to offer a special worship to Mother Kali in her temple, to thank her for answering her prayer. Her painful observation of Swamiji's current failing health had brought this unfulfilled vow to her conscious mind. Filled with the spirit of obedience, Swamiji performed all the rituals required to fulfil her vow. Bathing in the Adi Ganga, he proceeded to the temple in wet clothes and rolled three times on the ground before the image of Mother Kali. Then he circumambulated

the temple seven times. Alone, he performed the *homa* sacrifice in the complex on the west side of the *natmandir*. He returned to the Math, where he praised the temple priests for permitting him to fulfil his mother's vow at this time, remembering their same kindness to him on a prior visit to Kalighat for worship in May 1899.<sup>30</sup>

It was Bhuvaneshwari Devi's dearest wish to go on a long pilgrimage with Swamiji, and, in spite of his bad health, Swamiji long nurtured the desire to fulfil her wish as well as a strong desire that they should spend their last days together. Finally, he arranged to take his mother and other relatives on a pilgrimage to Dacca and Chandranath in East Bengal, and Kamakhya in Assam, accompanying them in each place. His desire to take her to Rameshwaram in South India remained unfulfilled; the pilgrimage was cancelled due to his failing health.

Having a premonition of his early death, Swamiji requested Swami Brahmananda to take care of his mother in his absence and also to settle her legal suit. He also asked him to take her to various pilgrimage centres in northern India. Swami Brahmananda regularly visited Swamiji's mother and consoled and helped her in various ways after Swamiji's demise. Bhuvaneshwari made pilgrimages to Puri in 1900 and 1903, accompanied by a swami or brahmachari from Belur Math. In 1911, Swami Brahmananda went with her to Puri. Some time after returning from Puri, her 'life of suffering and renunciation at the altar of family duties' came to an end on 25 July 1911 (1391-2).

We conclude our brief survey of Swamiji's devotion to his mother with one more detail of their sweet relationship:

One morning Swamiji's mother came to see him. ... She went up to the veranda of the first story and cried aloud, 'Viloo-oo', and her child came out of the room at once. The great Vivekananda was just



Swami Vivekananda in  
Shillong, March 1901

like a teen-aged son to his mother. He descended the stairs along with Bhuvaneshwari Devi, and then they walked in the garden-path together and conversed softly on personal matters.

During the last few years whenever Swamiji was at Calcutta he would go himself to his mother. While at Belur he would occasionally visit his mother at Calcutta, but if perchance he could not go to her for a week or two she would herself come down to Belur to see him and also ask his advice on family matters.<sup>31</sup>

### In Praise of Mother

Swamiji characteristically glorified his mother:

... always suffering, always loving. ... The love which my mother gave to me has made me what I am and I owe a debt to her that I can never repay. ...

I know that before I was born my mother would fast and pray and do hundreds of things which I could not do for five minutes even. She did that for two years. I believe whatever religious culture I have I owe to that. It was consciously that my mother brought me into the world to be what I am. Whatever little good impulse I have was given to me by my mother, and consciously, not unconsciously.<sup>32</sup>

Swamiji never tired of extolling the virtues of his mother. In 'Women of India,' a lecture he delivered on 18 January 1900 in Pasadena, California, Swamiji said: 'My father and mother fasted and prayed, for years and years, so that I would be born. ...

'She [my mother] was a saint to bring me into the world; she kept her body pure, her mind pure, her food pure, her clothes pure, her imagination pure, for years, because I would be born.'<sup>33</sup> In that same lecture, he indicated the early spiritual practice of reverence for the mother that he experienced: 'As children, every day, when we are boys, we have to go early in the morning with a little cup of water and place it before the mother, and mother dips her toe into it and we drink it' (8.57).

A true follower of Indian tradition, Swamiji always glorified his mother's great character. It was his strong conviction that no child can achieve real greatness without being respectful to parents, par-

ticularly to the mother.

Swamiji was a 'Condensed India.' The eternal spiritual heritage of India found in him an inspired champion of Mother-worship in and through the human mother. Literature all over the world glorifies mother-love as the most sacred form of dedication. If we add to that the Indian ideal of Mother-worship, we get a perspective of his extraordinary devotion to his mother. Conditioned from birth by the spiritual idealism of the race, he represents an ideal and philosophy and is himself a model of that idealism. Great souls like Bhuvaneshwari Devi and Swami Vivekananda are not born in a day. They are the product of the eternal Hindu culture. As the living gospel of practical Vedanta, Swamiji has left us the rich legacy of his exemplary devotion to his mother for the benefit of entire humanity. ❧

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# Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda

**Mrs Alice M Hansbrough**

*(Continued from the previous issue)*

‘**D**O you remember any incidents in connection with any of these meetings?’ the swami asked.

‘I remember that on one occasion when Swamiji was going to speak at the Green Hotel, Professor Baumgardt was talking with some other gentlemen on the platform before the lecture began. One of them asked him, regarding Swamiji, “He is a Christianized Hindu, I suppose?” And Professor Baumgardt replied, “No, he is an unconverted Hindu. You will hear about Hinduism from a real Hindu.”

‘On another occasion, Swamiji was speaking in some church. I do not remember now why, but he did not have a previously announced subject on that occasion. So when he came on the platform he asked the audience what they would like to have him speak on. I noticed several women and a man conferring together, and the man finally stood up and asked if Swamiji would speak on Hindu women. So Swamiji took this as his subject, and spoke principally about Sita and one other woman (was it Mirabai?).’

‘Yes, I know of that lecture,’ Swami Ashokananda said.

‘Do you know about the questions at the close of the talk?’ Mrs Hansbrough asked.

*Green Hotel, Pasadena, 1900*

‘No.’

‘Well, it was clear afterward that the group who had asked for this subject had done so in an attempt to trap Swamiji into saying something that would discredit him. We learned later that they belonged to some group who had missionaries in India. The questions they asked were along the line always taken by those trying to discredit India: the claim of abuse of Indian women, child marriages, early motherhood, and so on.

‘Swamiji answered several of the questions directly; then when he saw the direction the questioner was taking, he said that the relationship between the husband and wife in India, where the basis of marriage was not physical enjoyment, was so entirely different from that of a married couple in the West that he did not think Western people could understand it. As the questioner continued to press him, Swamiji really became angry. It was the only time I ever saw him angry on the platform. At one point, to emphasize a statement, he hit his knuckles on the table so hard that I really feared he would break the skin. “No, Madam,” he burst out, “that relationship in which children creep into life amidst lust, at night and in darkness, does not exist in India!”

‘Finally, the woman openly called him a liar. “Madam,” Swamiji replied, “you evidently know more about India than I do. I am leaving the plat-





VEDANTA SOCIETY OF  
SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

*Hilltop picnics. In the top photograph, Mrs Alice Hansbrough is seated to Swamiji's left, Mrs Carrie Mead Wyckoff stands behind him, and a Mrs Bruce sits to his right.*



form; please take it yourself!" He was thoroughly aroused. We had already gotten up, for we feared anything might happen now, and our only thought was to see him safely out of the building and home. He started up the middle aisle, but the woman with her friends blocked him and tried to continue her argument. Again he told her to take

the platform herself. At last we got through, but as I passed her the woman turned on me and exclaimed: "You little fool! Don't you know he hates you?" I said no, I hadn't found that out yet. One woman in particular set out to corner him. She started talking about how the English were trying to reform India, and Swamiji simply said: "Madam, I am a monk. What do I know about politics?"

'Swamiji spoke more than once of the indignities to which he had been subjected in the West. It was because of the constant possibility of some unpleasant occurrence that he always preferred to have a woman escort. He said that people would respect the woman where they would not respect him. Once in San Francisco, when I was taking him

somewhere into a rather rough part of the city on some call which escapes my memory now, some rowdies made some slighting remarks about him which he overheard. He said nothing, but after we had gone he remarked, "If you had not been along, they would have thrown things at me."

'He mentioned that well-known incident in Chicago when a man came up and pulled his robe and asked him why he wore his nightgown in public. He was deeply offended by such rudeness on the part of the American public. "A man could walk the length of India (in any costume) and such a thing would not happen to him," he said.

'He also spoke of the missionaries and their activities. He once said of Mr Leggett, "When I exposed the missionaries, he stopped giving his ten thousand dollars a year to them—but he did not then give it to me!"

'Well, now let us pick up the routine of his day again,' Swami Ashokananda said. 'What would he do in the morning when he did not have any lecture or class?'

'It seems as if there was always something going on,' Mrs Hansbrough said. 'This was always true on Sunday mornings. But during the week, if he did not have a formal meeting somewhere, we would often go for a picnic lunch to the top of a hill about four city blocks' distance from our house.

'The weather was especially pleasant that win-

ter; in fact they said it was the pleasantest winter in five years. You have seen that photo of Swamiji in a picnic group; that was taken on top of that hill. We would make up a party of people who were attending his meetings more or less regularly—or Swamiji would even hold some of his smaller class groups there. Naturally the talk was always on spiritual subjects.

‘I remember that on one of these picnics a young woman Christian Scientist, Lillian Davis, was arguing with him that we should teach people to be good. Swamiji smiled and waved his hand to indicate the trees and the countryside. “Why should I desire to be ‘good’?” he asked. “All this is His handiwork. Shall I apologize for His handiwork? If you want to reform John Doe, go and live with him; don’t try to reform him. If you have any of the divine fire, he will catch it.”

‘Was he a heavy smoker?’

‘No. He would smoke after breakfast, lunch, and dinner, but never to excess.

‘Sometime before he left for San Francisco he said one day, “I always leave something wherever I go. I am going to leave this pipe when I go to San Francisco.” He left it on the mantelpiece in the living room, and we kept it there for a long time as an ornament. Then one day Mrs Carrie Wyckoff saw it. For some time she had been suffering a good deal from some nervous ailment. For some days the pain of her illness had been almost unbearable, and this, added to her other troubles, made her feel extremely depressed. She went to the mantelpiece and picked up Swamiji’s pipe. No sooner did she have it in her hand than she heard Swamiji’s voice, saying, “Is it so hard, Madam?” For some reason she rubbed the pipe across her forehead, and instantly the suffering left her and a feeling of well-being came over her. After that we felt that the pipe should belong to her; and she still has it today.’

‘That is most interesting,’ Swami Ashokananda said. ‘Did you ever have any such experience?’

Mrs Hansbrough was thoughtful for a moment. ‘Well, isn’t it the same kind of experience when he talks to us all the time?’ she asked.

‘Oh yes,’ the swami replied.

After a minute or two he returned to the routine of Swamiji’s day. ‘Now, what would he do after lunch? Would he go to his room for rest?’ he asked.

‘No, he very rarely went to his room after lunch. He would usually recline on the couch in the living room and read there, or talk, or do some such thing.

‘It was probably during an after-lunch conversation when he was walking up and down the living room, that Swamiji told us: “The master said he would come again in about two hundred years—and I will come with him. When a master comes,” he said, “he brings his own people.”

‘I had the feeling that by “his own people” he meant Sri Ramakrishna would bring with him a spiritual host to help him; that it would not necessarily include all the disciples who had been with him in this incarnation, but that Swamiji definitely would be one of them.

‘I always felt, however, that whereas the rest of us were going up in our successive incarnations, Swamiji had come down to meet us on our level.

‘Miss MacLeod said that she brought him West “for his health”, but he never complained of it while he was with us.’

‘He was never sick or tired or any such thing?’

‘No, he never missed a meal or showed in any other way at that time that he was unwell.’

‘Was he at all susceptible to heat or cold?’

‘Cold did not bother him, but he was sensitive to heat. We always had a fire in the grate after dinner in the evening, and once when it had gone out, he exclaimed, “Praise the Lord, that fire’s out!”

‘Did you ever have guests for meals?’

‘Yes, often there would be luncheon guests. We would go to class or lecture in the morning, and Swamiji would ask some to come for lunch afterward. Mrs Leggett and Miss MacLeod especially were frequent luncheon guests. Miss MacLeod was also a house guest for a few days. She asked Helen one day, “Can you put me up for a few days?” Helen told her she was welcome, provided she didn’t mind



*The Mead sisters  
Alice Mead Hans-  
brough, Pasadena,  
1901 (left), and Car-  
rie Mead Wyckoff  
(Sister Lalita), Belur  
Math, c. 1936 (right)*



“hospital style accommodations”. As I said before, we had all moved to two front rooms of the second floor to let Swamiji be alone in the back of the second floor, so Miss MacLeod came and slept on a couch in the front room with the rest of us. She stayed several days and I think enjoyed it.

‘Miss MacLeod set aside her superior airs when she was with us. It was principally with people who affected the same airs that she put them on. And she never made the mistake of putting on airs with Swamiji. He often told her “where to get off” when she had a tendency to be too high-toned. But the only time I ever heard him speak sharply to her was before class in the ballroom of the Green Hotel. She was expressing an opinion as to what should be done about some phase of Swamiji’s work, and he suddenly turned on her. “Keep quiet about what should be done!” he said. “We will do whatever has to be done.” But he also said of her, “Jo has a very sweet nature.” He always called her “Jo.”

‘Now let us go back once more and finish his day,’ Swami Ashokananda said. ‘Tell me about the evening meal. What time would you sit down to dinner?’

‘Dinner would be about six-thirty. We would usually have soup, and either fish or meat, vegeta-

bles, and dessert—pie, perhaps, which Swamiji sometimes liked, or something else. Usually he did not take coffee in the evening.

‘It is Lent now, and this reminds me of one evening when Swamiji was walking up and down in the dining room while the table was being set for dinner. We always had a plate of spring fruit on

the table, and on this evening there were some guavas among the others. We were speaking of Lent and the custom of giving up some favourite food or pleasure during the forty days. Swamiji said that a similar custom existed in India which was always observed by the monks. “All but the wicked fellows like me renounce something,” he said. “Now I, for example, will renounce these guavas!” We took the hint and did not have guavas anymore after that!

‘When the evening meal was over, instead of going into the living room we would clear the dining room table and sit there, where we could light a fire in the open grate. Some would sit at the table, others would sit in easy chairs. We had an easy chair for Swamiji, which was large enough for him to sit cross-legged in, which he used to do. He usually wore either what you would call a dinner jacket or smoking jacket or his robe.’

‘Did Swamiji ever read to you from any of his books?’ Swami Ashokananda asked.

‘Yes, he often read to us, and he was an excellent reader. People used to ask where he got his fine pronunciation of English. He himself used to say that it came after he reached the United States. He said that until he came to the United States he had a “bookish accent”. Well, he read from various

*Pasadena, 1908*



things. Once he was talking about Advaita and asked for his “Song of the Sannyasin”, which he read to us. On another occasion late one evening as we sat by the fire, he asked for “The Need of a Guru”. He had been talking to Helen, and then he began to read from this. For some reason, after he had read for some time, Helen got up, lit his bedroom candle and offered it to him. By now it was about eleven o’clock. “Does that mean I must go to bed?” Swamiji asked. “Well, it is eleven o’clock,” Helen said, so the conversation closed.

‘Long afterward, we were talking of the incident and all three of us felt that indirectly Swamiji had been inviting Helen to ask for discipleship.’

‘Why didn’t your sister take it?’ Swami Ashokananda asked.

‘She said she herself didn’t know,’ Mrs Hansbrough replied. ‘She said she just didn’t feel impelled to at the time.’

‘Did you ever hear Swamiji sing?’

‘Yes. He would usually sing when he was on the way somewhere. He would sing a song in Sanskrit or Bengali or whatever it might be, and then ask, “Do you know the meaning of the song?” Then he would explain it. Of course he would also sing or chant on the platform, too.

‘At home he would sometimes sing that old hymn, “The heathen in his blindness bows down to wood and stone”. I had taught it to him and it used to amuse him.

‘Sometimes he would ask Lalita [Carrie Wyck-off] to stroll with him in the garden, and he would sing songs and explain them in a much more personal way than from the platform.

‘Once while Lalita was preparing something



Kitchen at the Mead house: Swamiji cooked here

in the kitchen for Swamiji, he was walking to and fro across the room as he often used to do. Suddenly he asked her, “Were you happily married?” For a moment she hesitated, then answered, “Yes, Swamiji.” He left the kitchen for a moment, and then came back. “I am glad”, he said dryly, “that there was one!”

‘At another time, Swamiji had prepared some dish for Lalita to try. When he asked her whether she liked it she said that she did. After a moment’s pause, Swamiji inquired, “Was it true, or just for friendship’s sake?” Then Lalita confessed, “I am afraid it was for friendship’s sake.”’

‘Tell me,’ Swami Ashokananda asked, ‘did Swamiji ever use slang?’

‘He did occasionally, but not in public. Once, however, he did in a lecture at the Shakespeare Club in Pasadena. He was speaking of the Christian missionaries in India and their attitude toward the Hindus. He said their teachings amounted to saying, “Here, take my tomfool tin pot, and be happy! That is all you need.”

‘And regarding missionaries, he was once speaking of their antagonism toward him, and he told of



a dinner to which he had been invited in Detroit. For some reason he suspected that his coffee had been poisoned. He was debating whether or not he should drink it, when Sri Ramakrishna stepped to his side, and said, "Do not drink—it is poisoned." He always spoke of his master as "Atmaram". Whenever there were difficulties he would say, "Well, if things do not go well, we will wake up Atmaram."

"The missionaries were not the only ones who opposed Swamiji. There were many teachers of metaphysics, and many pseudo-teachers, who resented him or maliciously condemned him either because he was so far superior to them or because he exposed their shallowness and "spoiled their business" by teaching true metaphysics. Mr Bransby was one of these, more or less. He was constantly finding fault with Swamiji. One of his criticisms was that Swamiji was breaking the rules of his Order by taking money. I later told this to Swamiji. He was chanting something at the time, and he stopped, smiled, and said, "Yes, it is true; but when the rules don't suit me, I change them!"

"Mrs Allan has told me of another occasion when Bransby had been to see Swamiji while he was in Alameda. When he returned, he said, "How do you think I found the great man? Sitting on the floor, eating peanuts!"

"On another occasion in a conversation at home when Mrs Leggett was there, he was talking of the English in India. He said that actually, "the English did not come to India to conquer us, but to teach us." The great misfortune however was, he said, that the English soldiers—even the officers—were of such low caste. And he told of a time when he was sitting on the lawn in a park close to a footpath. Two soldiers passed by and one of them kicked him. Surprised, Swamiji said, "Why did you do that?" "Because I like to, you dirty something-or-other!" "Oh, we go much further than that," Swamiji retorted. "We call you 'dirty mleccas'!" He spoke of the raping of low-caste Hindu women by the English soldiers. "If any one despoiled the Englishman's home," he said, "the Englishman would kill him, and rightly so—but the damned Hindu just sits and whines!" he exclaimed.

At this, Mrs Leggett, who always agreed with everything Swamiji said, remarked, "How very nice!"

"Do you think," he went on, "that a handful of Englishmen could rule India if we had a militant spirit? I teach meat-eating throughout the length and breadth of India in the hope that we can build a militant spirit."

"And that reminds me of a remark a Miss Blanche Partington once made about Swamiji later in San Francisco. She had been talking to Swamiji at the 1719 Turk Street flat. In answer to something she had said, Swamiji, bowing, had replied, "I am a loyal subject of Her Majesty [the Empress of India]!" Speaking of it afterward, Miss Partington said, "But it seemed to me he bowed almost too low!"

"Did Swamiji laugh and joke very much?" Swami Ashokananda asked.

"Not much," Mrs Hansbrough replied, "though he always told some story on the lecture platform. He said he gathered his mind in this way."

"Did you ever find him aloof, or did he make himself one with all?"

"I never found him aloof, though some said that he was. I felt as though he were someone to whom I was closely related, whom I had not seen for a long, long time, and who had been a long time coming.

"And indeed, Swamiji himself once said to Lalita, Helen, and me, "I have known all three of you before!" I think it was once when we were standing waiting for a train in San Francisco.

"Do you remember speaking the other day of the Christian in "Pilgrim's Progress" and the burden he carried on his back? Well, I felt that mine was on my chest—that is, after I met Swamiji, I felt the lifting of a burden which had been on my chest for so long that I had ceased to be conscious of it.

"When I returned to Los Angeles from San Francisco, after Swamiji had returned to the East, someone asked me how I felt about my brother [William Mead]. I replied that I did not know how I felt toward my brother, but that I felt much closer to the man I had been assisting in San Francisco than any other person I had ever known."

*(To be continued)*

# Madurai, the Legendary Temple City

**N Hariharan**

*(Continued from the previous issue)*

## **The Towers**

As they slowly move along, the magnificent south tower looms into view, and Valli cannot suppress a cry of unadulterated admiration. The grand tower is of really mammoth proportions. Selvi continues her narration: 'Valli, as I mentioned earlier, the south tower is the tallest structure in the entire temple complex: it is 170 feet high, its base 108 feet long and 67 feet wide. It is bejewelled, as it were, with 1,511 exquisite sculptural figures. The top of the tower commands a panoramic view of Madurai city. See the two giant *yalis* on both sides of the tower? The diameter of each eye of those creatures is two and a half feet! You will remember that the tower was built in the sixteenth century by Sevanti Chettiar.

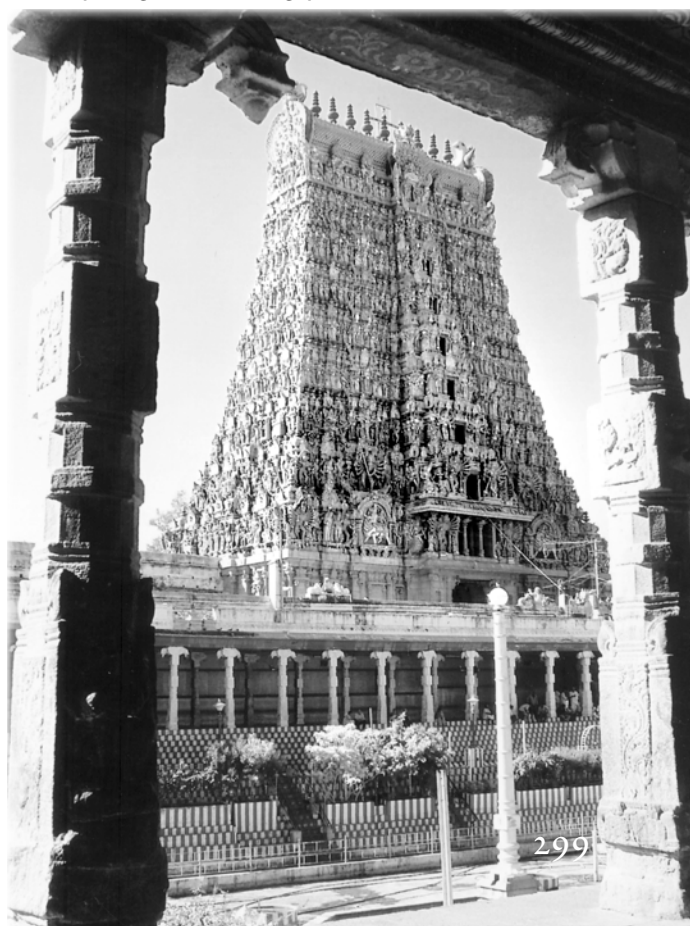
'Our tour now brings us to the western Adi Vithi. The offices of the Shivagangai Devasthanam are located on the north of the west tower. The west tower is 154 feet high with a base 101 feet by 64 feet. It contains 1,124 sculptural pieces. It was built by Parakrama Pandyan, who ruled Madurai between 1315 and 1347.

'The northern Adi Vithi exudes the fragrance of Tamil devotional literature. It is here that the Tiruppugal Sabha and the Tiruvalluvar Kazhagam are situated. The Tiruppugal Mandapam was built in 1952. The Tirukkural Kazhagam, housed in a beautiful mandapam, was started in 1941 by Tirukkural Attavadanam T P Subramania Das. This building is the venue of many religious meetings. Well, Valli, a striking feature of the north tower is—' 'That it is bald and looks incomplete!' interrupts Valli. 'And that is why it is called Mottai Gopuram, or Bald Tower,' Selvi continues. 'But it is not as plain as the name suggests: you can see some sculptural work on it. This nine-storeyed tower was built by

Krishnavirappa Nayakar during 1564–72. It stands 152 feet high on a base 111 feet long and 66 feet wide. To its west is the temple of Mottai Gopura Muniyandi. The deity is worshipped mainly on Tuesdays and Fridays. On those days the northern tower is decorated with thin flower garlands.'

Valli is in for a pleasant surprise now. 'Ever hear pillars sing?' her friend asks. Valli doesn't know what to say. 'Come, I will show you,' says Selvi. Beyond the north tower on the Adi Vithi stand five stone pillars. 'Observe them closely, Valli. Each pillar has been carved out of a single stone and each

*1,511 sculpted figures: the south gopuram*







*Chitrai festival: the deities on rathas*

contains within it more pillars, all finely crafted. These little pillars resonate when the outer pillar is struck and produce superb musical sounds. Listen.' Selvi taps the pillars, and Valli can't believe her ears: 'Why, it's like a symphony!' 'Even the Thousand Pillar Mandapam has this kind of musical pillar,' adds Selvi.

'Now we are on the eastern Adi Vithi. This 16-pillared mandapam at the head of the street is called Tattu Chutur Mandapam. It was built in 1772 by Venkateshwara Mudaliar and has paintings portraying the story of Manikkavachakar. Passing this we come to the Swami Sannidhi to the east of which stands the east tower. This is the oldest of the big towers. Since it was built by Maravarman Sundara Pandyan, who reigned from 1216 to 1236, it is also called Sundara Pandyan Gopuram. It is 153 feet high with a base 111 feet by 65 feet, and has 1,011 sculptures on it.'

That brings the girls' tour to an end. Stepping out of the temple complex, they enter East Chitrai Street where Selvi points to a small temple to the south of the east tower. 'That is the Madurai Viraswami temple, and opposite that is the famous Pudu Mandapam. It houses all kinds of shops and is in fact an unsophisticated version of Chennai's erstwhile Moore Market.'

### **Festivals**

Valli is mightily impressed by her friend's encyclopedic knowledge. As they sit in a parlour refreshing themselves with some ice cream, Selvi gives her an idea of the variety of festivals observed in Madurai. 'Madurai is a city of festivals. The grandest is, of course, the Chitrai. The highlights of this ten-day festival are Goddess Minakshi's coronation, her wedding with Sundareshvarar, and the car festival. A great flower-bedecked chariot bearing the *utsava*





*Tirumalai  
Nayakar Ma-  
hal: corridor,  
left, and at  
night, above;  
detail of wood  
carvings, be-  
low left*



*murtis* of the divine couple is drawn by crowds of fervent devotees along the four Masi streets around the temple. The gold image of Alagar, or Sundararajar—the presiding deity of the hill shrine of Alagar-koyil, 20 kilometres away, who is supposed to be the goddess's brother—is brought in procession to the Vaigai River to witness the wedding. Alagar's reaching the Vaigai is believed to be such a sacred event that it draws lakhs of devotees. Fairs are also organized on the occasion. The grand festival comes to a climactic close on full-moon day of Chitra.

'Valli, you know that Madurai Meenakshi, Kanchi Kamakshi, and Kashi Vishalakshi are three forms of the Divine Mother. So Navaratari, a festival sacred to the Divine Mother, is celebrated at the temple with great pomp. This too is a ten-day event marked by tremendous religious fervour. *Kolus*, galleries of colourful dolls of various sizes arranged in an imaginative manner, are the speciality of this festival. The *kolu* in the temple is set up in the in-

ner corridor of Mother's shrine on the southern side. Mother's image shines prominently among the dolls, and she is decorated in ten different ways during the ten-day period. The inner significance of the *kolu* is that the Divine Mother is the benign Empress of the entire universe, and all living beings are her happy subjects.

'Vasantotsavam and Avani Mulam are two other noteworthy religious occasions. During the latter, Shiva's *tiruvilayadals* are enacted. It also features a car festival. Other major festivals include the Teppam (Float) Festival, Arudra Darshanam, the Tiruppavai-Tiruvembavai festivals and Mahashivaratri. The Float Festival commemorates the birth anniversary of Tirumalai Nayakar. A brightly lit float carrying the *utsava murtis* of Minakshi-Sundareswarar goes round the illuminated Vandiyur Mariamman Teppakulam and is witnessed by thousands of devotees.'

Selvi's absorbing narrative comes to a close. It is evening and the two friends return home to plan the next day's sightseeing.

### ***Tirumalai Nayakar Mahal***

Next morning Selvi and Valli head towards the famous Tirumalai Nayakar Mahal, just two kilometres south-east of the Minakshi temple. Valli is impressed by the massive structure's medieval elegance and dignity. Selvi begins her commentary: 'This palace is a real showpiece, don't you think so? Tirumalai Nayakar built it in 1636 and it was here that he lived. Although large portions of the building were destroyed by his grandson when he



*Vandiyur  
Mariammam  
Teppakulam*

shifted the capital to Tiruchi, its attraction remains undiminished.

‘A classic example of the Indo-Saracenic style, the pièce de résistance of the Mahal is its carved dome that soars above the rest of the palace without the support of girders or rafters—a truly outstanding architectural feat for those days. The stuccoed domes and arches, the huge pillars—there are 248 of them, each 58 feet tall and 5 feet in diameter—the paintings and carvings, and the overall design of the Mahal speak volumes about the Nayaka kings’ flair for architecture. Inside you can see furniture and utensils used by them. The courtyard and the dancing hall here are centres of attraction. Besides the royal residence, the sprawling palace also has a shrine—the king used to celebrate major festivals in the palace—an armoury, and gardens.

‘It is interesting that a visitor can view the Kudalnagar temple from inside the Mahal, thus enjoying the double benefit of savouring the beauty of the palace plus having the darshan of the sacred temple at the same time. Nowadays visitors are treated to light-and-sound shows depicting the popular Silappatikaram story of Kannagi and Kovalan in both Tamil and English.’

After the previous day’s temple tour, this visit to the Tirumalai Nayakar Mahal was a different kind

of experience for Valli.

### ***Vandiyur Mariammam Teppakulam***

Next Selvi takes her friend to Vandiyur Mariammam Teppakulam, a vast artificial lake five kilometres east of the Minakshi temple. Valli jumps for joy at the very sight of it. ‘This is glorious!’ she cries. ‘It looks like a huge ornament with a lustrous gem embedded in its bosom!’ ‘Yes, yes,’ agrees Selvi, ‘that cute mandapam in the middle does look like a gem. It has an image of Vighneshwara inside. It is said that the rare image was discovered when the place was being dug up in order to supply building materials for the Tirumalai Nayakar Mahal. The lake is fed by the waters of the Vaigai through an ingenious system of underground channels. Oh, I forgot to tell you yesterday—the Float Festival is held on the day of Tai Pusam, in January–February.’

### ***Gandhi Memorial Museum***

From there Selvi and Valli go to the Tamukkam Palace, which is now home to the Gandhi Memorial Museum, one of Madurai’s modern landmarks. Selvi begins her commentary about the place: ‘Valli, once we get inside, you will realize that this place is a living memorial to the father of our nation. It is generally agreed that the building was built by

the Nayaka queen Mangammal around 1670. Soon after Mahatma Gandhi's assassination in 1948, the Gandhi Memorial Trust appealed to the people of India to donate funds for a suitable memorial to the fallen hero. The response was so overwhelming that the Trust allocated 10 million rupees for setting up Gandhi Memorial Museums in seven selected places across the country associated with Gandhiji's life. In 1955, the Madras state government gifted the Tamukkam Palace and 13 acres of land to the Gandhi Smarak Nidhi for building the museum in Madurai. Not many people know that Gandhiji visited Tamil Nadu fourteen times! Madurai is associated with certain momentous incidents in his life. It was here in 1921 that Gandhiji adopted his trademark dhoti-chadar dress; this sartorial style of his eventually earned for him the sobriquet "the half-naked fakir". And it was here that he achieved a historic triumph over untouchability: in 1946, he embarked on a relentless campaign that dealt a death blow to this social evil and ended with the doors of the Minakshi temple being thrown open to the Harijans.

'Selvi, yesterday you said Madurai is and has always been an important centre of political, economic, social, and cultural activity. I think I am slowly beginning to understand that. Really, its socio-political profile is so interesting,' remarks Valli. 'Not just interesting,' corrects Selvi, 'fascinating—I can promise you that! Just wait until we complete this tour.'

'Besides the picture gallery presenting a visual biography of Mahatma Gandhi by means of paintings, photographs, quotations, and photocopies of his important letters, the museum has special exhibitions on the Indian freedom movement, khadi and village industries, and handicrafts. I don't have to tell you that Gandhiji was the force behind all these social phenomena; in fact, he dedicated his life to their revival. Now let us go to the hall where some of Gandhiji's personal belongings are preserved.' Valli beholds the humble possessions of the great apostle of non-violence in mute admiration. 'Such simplicity!' she exclaims. 'If this isn't greatness, what is!'

Selvi leads her friend to the south of the building, where they come to a big open-air theatre. 'This can accommodate 8,000 people. Cultural events, weekly film shows, and public meetings are held here.' From there the girls move on to the Gandhi Kutir, a replica of Gandhiji's cottage in Sevagram, in front of the museum. Again, Valli is impressed by its simplicity. Finally they come to the large library in the north wing of the main building. It has some 20,000 volumes, mainly books on and by Gandhiji and allied literature. As the two friends emerge

*Gandhi Memorial Museum, below, with bronze statue of Mahatma Gandhi, right*



KAMALA L

from the museum, Selvi asks, 'Hope you found it all fascinating?' But both of them know there is no need of an answer.

### **Ramakrishna Math**

Their next stop is at the Ramakrishna Math, located to the north of the Vaigai. Selvi happens to be a devotee of Sri Ramakrishna, widely acknowledged as a modern incarnation of God. She wants to give her friend a brief account of the history and activities of this branch centre of the worldwide Ramakrishna Math: 'Valli, it is no exaggeration to say that, in a spiritual sense, this Ramakrishna temple is no less than the Minakshi temple! Both are mighty centres of energy ministering to the spiritual needs of the people. Just as Mother Minakshi arouses our devotional instincts, Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda inspire us spiritually with their life-giving messages. Together, they form a bulwark of Sanatana Dharma and Vedanta against mindless materialism.

'Compared to the ancient temple, this Ramakrishna centre is of very recent origin—it came into being just three decades ago, in 1975. However, from its humble beginnings as a private centre run by dedicated devotees it has steadily grown in

stature and blossomed into a full-fledged institution providing a wide range of services to the local people. But I will come to that later.

'Sri Ardhanari and Dr Shanmugam, one a merchant and the other a reputed surgeon, were the instruments Sri Ramakrishna chose for his work in Madurai. These two genuine devotees pooled their resources to start the private centre and served visiting swamis wholeheartedly. Thanks to their labour of love the centre was affiliated to the Ramakrishna Math in 1987.

'This beautiful temple that we see before us was consecrated by Srimat Swami Ranganathanandaji Maharaj, the thirteenth president of the Ramakrishna Order, on 13 March 1998. Besides daily worship and bhajans in the temple, the centre also holds weekly religious classes and monthly spiritual retreats in its spacious auditorium. But that's not all—it runs a primary school, a free coaching centre, a charitable dispensary, a library, and a bookshop. Furthermore, its monks and devotees are constantly engaged in serving poor and needy people in various ways: for instance, every day some three hundred poor children are fed here—and this has been going on for years! This is what Swami Vivekananda meant when he exhorted his followers to serve God in human beings. What do you say?'

After spending a few quiet moments in the prayer hall soaking up the serene atmosphere, the two girls turn their steps towards another place of interest.

### **Madurai Kamaraj University**

'We are now in Palakalai Nagar,' Selvi informs Valli. 'That vast, sprawling complex is the famed Madurai Kamaraj University, a veritable temple of learning. Until a few decades back, Tamil Nadu had only

*Sri Ramakrishna Temple, Madurai*



one university, the Madras University. In view of the growing number of colleges in the southern districts, the state government felt it prudent to establish another university in Madurai. This was started in 1966, and the University of Madras Extension Centre Library was renamed Madurai University Library. The city complex, however, soon proved inadequate for the university's growing needs. So in 1973 it was shifted to its present location in Palakalai Nagar near Vadapalanji village on the Theni main road, 13 kilometres west of Madurai city. The foundation stone of the new complex was laid by President Dr Zakir Hussain. But it was only in 1978 that Madurai University got its new name Madurai Kamaraj University. The institution occupies a picturesque 753-acre area with the Nagamalai hills in the background.'

After a quick tour of the university campus and its numerous departments, it is time to return home. Valli looks thoroughly satisfied. After dinner Selvi winds down her narrative: 'Valli, there are still a few more things about Madurai that I must not fail to mention. This city has been visited by Sri Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda. This is where Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi was born and attained spiritual illumination when he was a young boy. On a different level, in the sphere of classical music, some of the top-notch artists it has produced include the legendary M S Subbulakshmi, Madurai Mani Iyer, T N Sheshagopalan, G S Mani, and Madurai Somasundaram. Two cultural institutions, Sadguru Sangita Samajam and Tamil Isai Sangam, are doing great service in the field of fine arts, particularly Carnatic and Tamil music. The Lakshmi Sundaram Hall and Raja Muthiah Manram are two other prestigious auditoriums that serve as venues for cultural programmes.


'So, you see, Madurai is that rare and happy amalgam of the ancient and the modern, the orthodox and the unorthodox, the old and the new. Beneath the dazzle of technology that you see from outside runs a powerful current of spirituality. Madurai's strength lies in its amazing resilience, in its capacity to absorb everything good that modern technology

has to offer, while yet standing solidly on its traditional moorings. It has successfully combined the calm dignity of the old and the explosive energy of the young. This gives the city its perennial beauty, which age cannot wither nor custom stale—a city of paradoxes, indeed!'

### Salutations to Devi Minakshi

Next day, as the train trundles out of the station, Valli sits by the window unmindful of the surrounding bustle. As the train slowly gathers speed, her eyes seek out the temple towers. Gazing at them, she offers her salutations to Goddess Minakshi:

*Madhurapurāṇāyike namaste  
madhurālāpīśukābhirāmahaste  
malayadhvajapāṇḍyārājakanye  
mayi mīnākṣi kṛpām vidhehi dhanye.*

Salutations to the Queen of Madhurapuri! O the one holding in her graceful hand a sweet-tongued parrot! O the princess of Malayadhwaja Pandya! O blessed Minakshi, show me compassion! 

### How Many Vinas?

Every year, on the Vijaya Dashami day, a magnificent expression of devotion takes place at Sri Minakshi Temple: 108 veena artists assemble to dedicate a congregational recital to Mother Minakshi. The recital lasts a couple of hours, and is held in a massive temple hall accommodating several hundred people. Furthermore, every Friday evening, a veena artist performs at the temple. It is a unique and meaningful way of saluting the Goddess—the source of all vidya.



# REVIEWS

For review in PRABUDDHA BHARATA,  
publishers need to send **two** copies of their latest publications.



## **Swami Prajnanananda: A Spiritual Biography** Kunja Bihari Kundu

Mrs Amiya Kundu. Copyright and distribution: Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, 19-A & B Raja Rajkrishna St, Kolkata 700 006. E-mail: [ramakrishnavedantamath@vsnl.net](mailto:ramakrishnavedantamath@vsnl.net). 2005. viii + 103 pp. Rs 50.

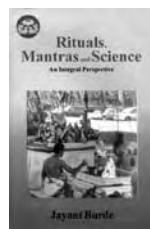
**B**iographies of saints and monks and those who live a meditative life are always difficult to write, as most of their struggles that made them what they are are hidden from public gaze. The scholar monk Swami Prajnananandaji, however, had numerous dimensions to his personality, so his biographer—a disciple who had a long association with his guru—had at his disposal a lot of material to draw upon. Swami Prajnanananda was recognized as a philosopher, musicologist, art historian, master of fine arts, vocalist, author, and guru. Moreover, Swami Prajnanananda was a disciple of Swami Abhedananda, one of Sri Ramakrishna's direct disciples.

This small biography sets forth the high points in Swami Prajnanananda's ninety-two fruitful years of life. It traces his ancestry to humble and pious forefathers, and discusses his dedication to music and musical instruments, his scriptural studies, meeting with his guru, renunciation, and service. It was Swami Prajnanananda's contact with Swami Abhedananda, as a young man in Calcutta, that deepened his life immensely and enkindled the embers of spirituality glowing within him.

Swami Prajnanananda was an accredited authority, in the highest circles, on the history and styles of music, and wrote many learned treatises on these subjects. Though being feted and followed all his active life, he remained essentially his own simple self—a humble devotee of Sri Ramakrishna. He was a prolific writer and edited the entire *Complete Works of Swami Abhedananda* in eleven volumes. Swami Prajnanananda has about forty books in English and Bengali to his credit.

As President of the Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, he steered the organization through very difficult times, always maintaining his sense of humour and wit. Towards the end, old age robbed him of his health and eyesight, but could not touch his sweetness or spirituality. Devotees and disciples found in Swami Prajnanananda sympathy and sensitivity—someone they could approach, to whom they could unburden all their troubles. His literary legacy, and even more the example of his personal life, will continue to inspire people for a long time to come.

*Swami Satyamayananda*  
Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata



## **Rituals, Mantras and Science: An Integral Perspective** Jayant Burde

Motilal Banarsidass, 41 U A Bungalow Road, Jawahar Nagar, Delhi 110 007. E-mail: [mlbd@vsnl.com](mailto:mlbd@vsnl.com). 2004. xxii + 262 pp. Rs 395.

**T**his book is about the place of science in rituals and mantras, as mentioned by the author himself in the preface. It is largely based on an earlier book written by Frits Staal in 1989 called *Ritual and Mantras: Rules without Meaning*. It consists of three parts: the first part is about religious rituals, the second about the analytical tools of interpretation, and the third about rituals and science.

The first part opens with a chapter on 'Vedic and Ancient India'. This chapter is also based upon an earlier book by A L Basham. This is evident from the author's statement that the Vedic Aryans were Indo-European nomadic tribes who migrated to India sometime between 1500 and 1000 BCE. It is rather surprising that even in the year 2004 Indian authors are referring to the Aryan migration. This hypothesis of Bopp, Schlegel, Max Müller, and others has now been discredited by the work done by such scholars as Frawley, Kak, Feuerstein, and Rajaram. Maybe, it will still take a long time for this to sink into the

mindset of Indian intellectuals. This chapter sets the tone, as it were, for the book, since it contains quite a few inaccurate statements. For instance, on page 17, the author has cited the four *mahavakyas*. Of these, three are wrong!

The second chapter introduces the Vedic mantras. The author seems to focus only on one category of mantra, the *bija mantra*, though the Vedic literature contains thousands of different mantras used in daily life. This pattern follows throughout the book. The third chapter is about Tantra and Yoga. This chapter is well-written and provides an adequate introduction to these concepts.

The analytical tools introduced in the five chapters of the second part are essentially the principles of mathematical logic. Here there is a major emphasis on structures rather than on meaning. Even the short discussion on ‘The meaning of “Meaning”’, which deals with interpretation, is based on Western paradigms. The analysis of Vedic mantras cannot be done using these methods of interpretation.

It is very difficult for a person born in a particular culture to understand and interpret the practices of an alien culture. The author states that many of the mantras used in rituals are devoid of meaning. This is so if the frame of reference is an alien culture, say the European. To give an oft-cited example: What meaning does a Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, or Sikh, or even a Muslim, see in the Christian ritual of partaking of ‘the flesh and blood’ of Christ? Would they be wrong in thinking this ritual to be cannibalistic and savage? This is the danger faced when the norms of one culture are used to study other cultures. The author’s discussion would have been much more meaningful had he consulted the works of Indian thinkers like Swami Vivekananda or Sri Aurobindo.

The third part of the book is devoted to the application of the analytical tools to rituals. Here too, the philological principles applied to the mantras are based primarily on those applicable to European languages. The structural aspects of any language should be studied by using the principles pertaining to that language. The most appropriate technique to study the language of the mantras is that provided by Yaska’s *Nirukta* or Panini’s grammar. Otherwise one will be led to absurd conclusions, like saying that *bija mantras* are based on animal sounds and that mantras came into existence before spoken language or grammar (and here the author does not have the eternal nature of mantras in mind).

Perhaps the most interesting chapter in the en-

tire book is the one on ‘Science, Non-Science and Pseudo-Science’. The author warns against exaggerated claims made by some traditional scholars. This warning is quite timely. One has to exercise a lot of caution trying to read non-existent meanings into mantras. The examples given by the author about supernatural powers, scientization—claiming that all mantras are nothing but vibrations, like electromagnetic waves—and the like, bear out this point very well. The author is particularly harsh on Vedic Mathematics, and quite justifiably too.

It is rather difficult to pinpoint the author’s aim in writing this book. Is it to show that mantras are meaningless sounds? Or is it to show that mantras are, partly at least, scientific? There is not much of science or scientific method talked about in the book, except the concept of ‘falsification’. At the end, the reader is likely to be left baffled, because there is a little of everything, which does not finally add up to much. At least that is the reaction of this reader. The scientific study of mantras should be based on their sound patterns and not on their grammatical or syntactical aspects.

The book does serve one important purpose, however. It helps us think a little more seriously about our ancient heritage. The author needs to be thanked for this service.

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## Overcoming Anger

Swami Budhananda

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600 004. E-mail: [srkmath@vsnl.com](mailto:srkmath@vsnl.com).  
2006. v + 130 pp. Rs 20.

Everybody knows anger and its consequences. We see anger displayed everywhere—among our family, friends, and acquaintances, in literature, and on celluloid; we experience anger directed towards us, and we ourselves become angry. But it is perhaps our own anger that we least understand. In *Overcoming Anger*, Swami Budhananda plumbs the depths of anger; and one may be left aghast to discover the extent of one’s ignorance about this subject. As the title indicates, the solutions for conquering this terrible emotion are lucidly explained in this volume.

The book had its genesis in a series of lectures

delivered by the learned author at the Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, New Delhi, in 1982. These lectures were later published as a series of articles in the *Vedanta Kesari* from May 2003 to January 2005.

Swami Budhananda's grasp of the subject is comprehensive, and he puts his thoughts across in simple language. The author must have had to wrestle with this universal foe himself; his own experience breathes life into his writing, which shows unusual depth. This, coupled with the author's scholarship, takes one through different perspectives and traditions both religious and non-religious.

Anger is not merely a 'temporary madness'. It is a very complex phenomenon having many sources in the psychophysical system. Thus a frontal attack on it will prove futile and frustrating. Anger inexorably corrodes and eats its way into our vitals, our health, our peace, our resources, and our relationships. The author advocates adopting an integrated approach for tackling anger, which will act like a bulwark against the frittering away of our energies. Once one is earnest and the process takes off, one begins to acquire immense power and self-confidence. Self-mastery is always elevating, and even a little well-directed effort never goes to waste.

Nowadays people tend to glorify and rationalize their anger. This booklet is a timely antidote for this mistake. It is recommended for everyone, young and old.

Swami Satyamayananda



### **The Legend of Rumi**

Dr K Hussain

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**M**ystics form the cream of any religious tradition. Since their experiences involve a domain beyond the grasp of the senses, the words they use to depict these experiences are paradoxical in nature. Nevertheless, these words, which convey the ideas of divine *love, beauty, and bliss*, are intelligible to one who is able to delve deep into the hearts of mystics.

Jalaluddin Rumi, the king of mystics in the Sufi tradition, is no exception to this fact. His Persian magnum opus *Masnavi* is a rich treasure of poems and fables. Dr K Hussain, an ardent student of

Rumi's works, has come out with an elegant volume comprising of the essentials of Rumi, arranged and re-told in a manner pleasing to the mind as well as soothing to the heart.

Love and beauty are the very cornerstones on which Rumi has built his mystical edifice. All his experiences revolve around them. Smitten by the captivating allure that has drawn him towards his divine beloved, Rumi submits himself to a series of experiences, all of which add up to his dazzling spiritual radiance.

Love and beauty in the divine sphere are all-encompassing in nature, yet inexplicable through words. Rumi indicates them allegorically in a poetic setting that is nectar to hear or read but very hard to relate to. Dr Hussain has presented some of these gems in this book, which are not only representative but also wide-ranging.

The first section gives a vivid insight into the life, writings, and philosophy of Rumi. As Prof. B Sheik Ali points out in his excellent introduction, love is the moving energy of the world, and with love as the central focus, Rumi radiates his thoughts on mind, matter, and soul.

The second section consists of a brief biographical sketch of Rumi and a short introduction to the *Masnavi*. They are followed by some delightful poems on such topics as 'Mysteries of Love' and 'Reaching the Supreme Being', with elaborate annotations. In one poem, Rumi chooses the flute as a symbol to convey his thoughts on secrets of life:

It is the fire of love that has entered the flute,  
It is the flute's intoxication of love that is in  
the wine

What really makes this book highly readable is the inclusion of parables and stories, which form the third and fourth sections respectively. As the author points out in his prologue, it is imperative for a reader to contemplate on the inner philosophical significance of each story, failing which, he misses the very purpose for which they are composed. Rumi is prepared to bestow divine love in abundance on one and all: 'Love is the water of life; receive it in thy Heart and Soul.'

What Rumi offers is an invaluable spiritual treasure that enriches one's life. Let us look into our own hearts and see if they are pure enough to receive it.

Swami Vireshananda  
Ramakrishna Ashrama, Mysore



# REPORTS

## **News from Belur Math**

The birthday (tithi puja) of Sri Ramakrishna was celebrated at Belur Math on 19 February 2007. Cooked prasad was served to about 31,000 devotees. The public celebration of Sri Ramakrishna's birthday was held on Sunday, 25 February, and drew more than one lakh visitors who thronged the Math throughout the day. Cooked prasad was served to about 39,000 persons on that occasion.

## **New Sub-centre of Ramakrishna Mission**

Swami Vivekananda visited Belgaum in October 1892, and stayed first for three days with Sadashiv B Bhate. The house in which he stayed, known as Bhate's house, has become the town centre of **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Belgaum**. On 3 February, the land and buildings were received from Ramakrishna Vivekananda Sevashrama, Belgaum.

## **Ardha Kumbha Mela**

**Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission Sevashrama, Allahabad**, organized a medical camp and an exhibiton on Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda at the Triveni Sangam on the occasion of Ardha Kumbha Mela, from 1 January to 2 February. 21,777 people received treatment at the medical camp, and nearly 1.5 lakh people visited the exhibition.

## **National Youth Day**

Some more of the important programmes conducted by centres of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission in observance of National Youth Day on 12 January were as follows: Chapra (meeting addressed by Bihar youth affairs minister Sri Janardan Singh Sigrimal), Chennai Math (essay compe-



*The cot and walking stick used by Swami Vivekananda, preserved at Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama Town Centre, Belgaum*

tion in which about 72,000 students from 1,100 educational institutions participated), Jalpaiguri (youth convention, teachers' convention), Jamshedpur (youth convention, essay competition), Mumbai (garlanding of the statues of Swamiji at the Gateway of India and at Swami Vivekananda Udyan, Mahim), Rajkot (garlanding of four statues of Swamiji at different places in Rajkot).



*Ardha Kumbha Mela, Triveni Sangam, below, and rendering medical aid, right*





Swami Atmasthanandaji presents the Vivekananda Medal 2006 to Dr Pankaj Shah, a managing trustee of SEWA Rural

## Prabuddha Bharata

### Vivekananda Medal

The Vivekananda Medal is awarded annually by the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Kolkata, to persons or organizations striving to implement Swami Vivekananda's ideas for rural development in India. On 11 January, at a function held at the institute, Srimat Swami Atmasthanandaji Maharaj, Vice President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, presented the Vivekananda Medal 2006, consisting of a gold medal, a cash award of Rs 25,000, and a citation, to SEWA Rural (Society for Education, Welfare and Action – Rural), Jhagadia, Gujarat, in recognition and appreciation of their valuable contribution to the uplift of the tribal and rural people in southern Gujarat, drawing inspiration from the ideas and ideals of Swami Vivekananda.

### Achievements

Riddhipratim Basu, a student of **Ramakrishna Mission Degree College, Rahara**, won a bronze medal in the International Mathematical Olympiad 2006, held in Slovenia.

A student of **Ramakrishna Mission Vidyapeeth, Deoghar**, stood first among the contestants from Jharkhand in the Green Olympiad, the annual environmental examination organized by The Energy and Research Institute (TERI), New Delhi, last year. The Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India, awarded him a scholarship of Rs 5,500.

### News from Branch Centres

Srimat Swami Gahananandaji Maharaj, President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, inaugurated the new high-school building for girls at **Matri Mandir and Ramakrishna Mission Sarada**


**Sevashrama, Jayrambati**, on 4 February.

### Relief

**Winter Relief:** 6,631 blankets were distributed through the following centres of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission to poor people affected by the severity of winter: Chapra, 436; Gol Park, 300; Jayrambati, 1,000; Ichapur, 800; Muzaffarpur, 30; Puri (Mission), 2,554; Raipur, 700; Shyamla Tal, 186; Sikra Kulingram, 200; Varanasi Home of Service, 425.

**Distress Relief:** The following centres distributed various items to poor and needy persons of nearby areas: Agartala (400 saris and 110 dhotis); Chapra (500 garments); Garbeta (60 sweaters); Jayrambati (1,804 saris); Raipur (200 shawls and 300 saris); Sikra-Kulingram (100 saris).

**Ramakrishna Mission Boys' Home, Rahara**, sank a tube-well at Dakshin Barasat Vivekananda Palli village in South 24-Parganas district.

**Fire Relief: Ramakrishna Math, Baghbazar**, served cooked food for six days, and distributed 250 blankets, 500 saris, 200 dhotis, 200 lungis, 156 shirts, 156 shorts, 132 frocks, 880 bamboo poles, etc. to 216 families whose houses had been gutted by a devastating fire in Ultadanga, Kolkata. 

Blankets against winter cold, Chapra



**Corrections:** Feb. 2007, p. 178: for 'By 1890, when he was just thirty years of age...' read 'By 1883, when he was forty-three years of age...' For the sentence beginning 'His talents came to the notice,' read 'His talents came to the notice of the viceregal government, which proposed that he attend a session of the Finance Committee of the British Parliament in 1874, when he was only 34. This session, however, was later cancelled.'